GOLDEN TIME

ゴールデンタイム

3

仮面舞踏会

竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト・駒都えーじ

電撃文庫

ゴールデンタイム
GOLDEN TIME

3
仮面舞踏会

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト●駒都えーじ
デザイン●ビィビィ

CAST

多田万里 …… 主人公。上京してきた大学一年生。

加賀香子 …… お嬢様。超完璧。
いや、ほぼ完璧。だいたい完璧。……多分完璧。

柳澤光央 …… 万里の友達。通称やなっさん。

林田奈々 …… 二年の先輩。通称リンダ。

岡千波 …… ほっこりラブリーな森ガール。XSサイズ。

二次元くん …… 三次元に絶望した男。本名佐藤。

NANA先輩 …… 謎の先輩（コスプレではないらしい）。

ゴールデンタイム3
GOLDEN TIME
IN THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA AT MORNING

ON THE VILLA SEA AT NIGHT
ゴールデンタイム3
GOLDEN TIME
僅頭時報告

Golden Time

Volume 3

~Masquerade~

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Prologue

The eldest son of the Hayashida family, who Banri only knew of as "Ani", was already gone by the time he entered high school.

The Hayashida-san in his class who joined the running club with him was Linda, for short.

"Actually, that's my big brother," she said, pointing before her with a strangely sour looking face.

He was a volunteer who was subbing in for the coach of the soccer club which practises on the same field as the running club.

A graduate of Banri's high school, and an old member of the soccer club too, Ani was in those days a third-year student at a local college. It was unexpected that he was Linda's older brother, but even Banri has heard of him before. That coach, his voice strangely loud, shouted "Go Big!" and on that occasion seemed to be all seeing.

Faster than the rest, he came into sight around the dusty track dressed in an old jersey. Standing imposingly, he lay in wait as the soccer team, running double-time, gathered to him.

"Uvoi!"

He shouted at them one by one, as if his voice were bolts of lightning cast off by a sky-god. While he nodded, his chin drawn back, his eyes burning hotly, he clapped loudly with the palms of his big hands. The team members dutifully shouting back, "Avoi!", the group now slowly taking shape and running off as light-footed as ever. There was certainly a reason the soccer club had a tendency to be forever hoarse.

In that place, if there were girls calling out "My Boy!" (average fan-girls), there were also those saying "My Ball!" (the noisy ones), and there were even those shouting "Move it!" (the demon coach's fans). There were even a few who seemed to have fired themselves up so they could just shout "Oi! Oi!" (the punk rocker types).

His muscular silhouette was altogether Donkey Kong. All of Ani's body brought about the impression: his athletic body build, the thick feet characteristic of an experienced soccer player, even a certain monkey-like friendliness towards others. You couldn't say those looks were flattering, as if he were descended from gorillas. His slender younger sister Linda was almost exactly the opposite, the two of them never having resembled each other.

Eventually, Ani seemed to notice the gazes directed at him. While easily waving in our direction and showing a friendly smile, he deliberately shouted "Uvoi!", like a gun going off.

But Linda, not cutting him any slack for being her brother, frowned and complained "Hey, cut it out! It's embarrassing," flipping her long hair (done in a ponytail), and quickly turning the other way.

Without answering, he turned his "Uvoi!" gun to vainly fill the entire grounds with its roar. Not the giant, glove-like back of his hand, nor a covering smile, entirely got rid of that sad place.

Unable to sit still, Banri rushed in by himself, belatedly reacting to him. Flying before Ani, imitating, no, mimicking the members of the soccer club, he shouted "Avoi!" at the top of his lungs.

Ani took what he was hearing with a happy-looking face. He looked as happy as a gorilla spotting a banana in the forest. Banri knew that by the standards of wild animals, he was a lonely one. In the natural world, to be isolated from the herd was life threatening.

From then on, it got to where every time Ani and Banri ran into each other, they'd greet each other with shouts. Sometimes, punching each other in the shoulder, nearly smashing them, they'd call out in good-humor, "Hey, howya doing!?" and "Whatcha up to?", not really expecting an answer. Before long, it got to where Ani even shouted to Linda.

One day, Ani decided to find a job, and quit the coaching he'd done for two whole years.

---Well, that was all.

If he said so, then it really was all there was.

"Your brother is such a nice guy, I can't just watch and see him betrayed like this!"

It was a summer day, in their third year of high school.

Banri spoke forcefully, looking at Linda's profile crouched down next to him. Whether it was righteous indignation, or an equivalent feeling, Banri's voice was going high and hysterical. Even though he was merely acquainted with the matter, for Banri it was something he could not be quiet about.

On the road in the blazing sun, the two were playing detective like kids.

They were making themselves small, hiding in the gap between a telephone pole and some bushes. The hot rays of sunlight were shining down on their heads, putting at risk the preparations they had done for their college entrance exams. Nearly an hour had passed already.

Drops of sweat flowed steadily down from Linda's temples to her suntanned cheeks. Eyes wavering in concern, they fell to the shadows at her feet, not looking at Banri's face. Her lips moved slowly.

"I understand. But, calm down a little."

"What's with this?" Banri muttered to himself, quickly and roughly.

At first, it was Linda who suggested that there was something important they had to talk about. She said she might need his help.

That person is cheating on him. She's betrayed Ani. I won't allow it. Linda went on like that, her lips trembling.

He'd heard from Linda that they'd decided to get married after Ani had been working for a year. It was around the time of the summer rains, if he wasn't mistaken. He remembered standing next to Linda, talking while watching the raindrops paint arteries across the glass and the pale hydrangea blooming all over the schoolyard.

At that time, Banri blessed Ani from the bottom of his heart. He felt that she must have been quite the woman, to fall in love with and understand the goodness in that Ani. He heard the ceremony would be in the fall, when the colors were at their best, and he imagined that it would have surely been a magnificent day. Dancing on the brightly colored leaves under a deep blue sky, the couple would have celebrated a sort of youthful happiness. Thinking along those lines, even the chill of that day's rainfall was forgotten.

But this summer, Ani's fiancée betrayed him.

At another guy's suggestion, he had gone out to a part of town he didn't know so he could take the mock exam for a big-name college prep school when by chance he'd spotted Linda.

Linda said the photo she'd taken was proof. Jabbing the irrefutable evidence towards him, she said that she was going to tell everything to Ani and all their relatives on both sides, and get them to own up to their mistake. She said she had to stop a trainwreck. The engagement would be called off, of course. She said she wanted her to fall apart, living alone, branded as "a woman of questionable virtue" forevermore, unable to earn a living yet made to pay a settlement. Even speaking of wanting to brand a scarlet letter on her forehead, it didn't sound like she was joking. Frankly, she's a little scary, Banri thought.

In spite of carrying on so much, Linda made Banri come along with her to the apartment where the cheating occurred. Wh|en Ani's fiancée, arm in arm with her boyfriend, was about to enter, she suddenly lowered her voice and aimed her cell-phone camera at them. They waited a bit, crouched down once more, unmoving.

At Banri's side, an aggravated Linda witnessed the scene of the crime. Indeed, the two who'd done it, this disgusting pair, had walked all over Ani and made a fool of him. The more he thought about it, the more he lost control over his anger. This is horrible, he thought. Isn't this a bit too much? Rather, Banri thought, if they were to somehow break into the apartment, certainly they'd be able to get pictures showing even more evidence of their infidelity. Would this be enough, he wondered, with only the photo of the filthy couple entering the apartment hand in hand?

In spite of that,

"...Hey. When they were walking arm-in-arm just now, did you take a shot with your cell-phone too?"

"I took one. I took it, but even so, somehow a more definitive shot..."

"Would you delete it for me?"

His mouth hanging open like an idiot, Banri looked back at Linda's face. Verifying that his hearing was fine, Linda opened up his cell-phone.

"Hold on!? Huh!? What're you doing!?"

Before he could stop her, she deleted the pictures they'd finally taken at the end of their stakeout.

"Sorry. I've changed my mind."

Linda finally looked up. She was so pale, her suntan seems to have faded,

"I will put on my 'adult mask'!"

Banri swallowed his retort at once.

He could not imagine what kind of changes had awakened in Linda's mind in these last few minutes. He couldn't understand at all, except that her expression looking back at him seemed cold.

'Adult mask'? What did that mean, specifically? He couldn't even ask her.

When the sound of heels descending the iron steps from the apartment reached their ears, Banri and Linda both gasped. Ani's fiancée was coming out alone. Her car was sitting right there in the parking space. Flashing, her keyholder swayed and jingled. As Banri sighed and thought about what to do, Linda stood up on her own.

"I'm going to go talk with her."

You wait here, she told him.

"Eh!? T-Talk about what!?"

"To tell her to stop doing these things already."

"Telling her... that she is living with a scarlet letter!?"

Without answering, Linda spun around in her summer uniform skirt and ran by herself over to

the parking spot in front of the apartment. The fiancée, trying to get into her shiny silver Suzuki Wagon R, must have realized that Linda was getting closer to her. Who knows what she was feeling, frozen in place for a few seconds, expressionless, then giving an exaggerated laugh, "Whaat!? Ehehe!" When Linda said, "I'd like to talk with you inside the car," her face suddenly became frightened. Saying "Eh, you're wrong, your quite wrong! I can't right now!" she tried to return to the apartment. If Banri had not run up and stood in her way as if he were meditating, she would surely have gotten away then.

Carrying a large tote-bag, a beige cotton cap on her head, her arms covered by long driving gloves to protect against sunburn while driving, she was a rather ordinary woman.

She got into the car with Linda, and even Banri could see she was upset and had begun to cry. As if she were trying to get on Linda's good side, she was pushing playfully with both hands against Linda's shoulder in the passenger seat, leaning her body and drawing her face close, desperately arguing about something.

Banri turned his back to the situation, setting his butt against the hood of the car. He flinched from the burning hot metal plate, but dealing with it, stuffed his hands into his pants pockets.

In the apartment, on the second floor. The up until now tightly shut curtain moved, and he noticed that from an opening of a few centimeters, a guy was looking down on them.

It was the other guy they'd seen earlier. Banri could not tell his expression from the single eye peeking through the curtain.

Scary, he thought.

Besides that, the women in the car were scary. Though she was crying sorrowfully right now, could her personality suddenly change completely, into a fit of rage? He didn't know what would happen to him, nor to Linda. Because these people could casually do horrible things, what was common sense to most people might not apply here.

While under such fear, Banri nevertheless squared his shoulders firmly, sitting on his hot pockets. Exaggerating his movements on purpose, he crossed his legs, unconsciously tapping his feet, scowling, glaring, trying to seem a bit larger and adult-like, stronger, bracing himself to look more dangerous.

He was acting as Linda's bodyguard. Though it wasn't easy, for the time being. At the least, he needed to place himself between her and danger. Because of that, even though he was as nervous as could be, Banri desperately acted the tough guy.

As he was doing so, he thought, 'We condemn you.' We are blaming the woman completely, beyond any hope of redemption. You are the worst. We will be your ruin, will never forgive you, and are resolved to so condemn, rebuke, and sentence you to being tattooed with the scarlet letter.

However, going against Banri's thoughts, what he heard leaking out to him of Linda's voice retained its composure to the very last.

If you are still thinking you want to get married, then please don't do this kind of thing again. Because I forget. I beg of you, please stop already.

Trying repeatedly to ascertain if Ani's fiancée was only sobbing and nodding,

"Please calm down a little more before you drive. Be careful so you don't get in an accident."

In the end, she even got worried like that.

Linda having come down from the car, Banri rushed over to her in long strides and half-forced his arm around her shoulder. While they walked like that, snuggled up as if they were a pair of lovers,

"Absolutely don't look behind you. ...That guy was watching us the whole time."

"...Really? Sca..."

For some reason, Linda was laughing softly.

The shoulder he held was shaking.

Stiffening and going pale, Linda's face was like something out of a painting he'd seen in an art history textbook in middle school--- perhaps of Joanna the Mad. That one had been completely broken, a woman with the lights on but nobody home. He remembered it because it was a popular one to imitate for a while. To Banri it seemed just like that.

Just before leaving the parking spot, Banri carefully looked back over his shoulder. Inside the car Ani's fiancée was still crying, and the guy who had been looking down at them could no longer be seen. Even so, he was still scared, and until Banri had turned two corners, he kept his arm around Linda's shoulder.

Still keeping quiet, the two of them continued walking down the twilit street.

They wanted to get as far as away as they could from the place. Though she didn't say anything, he thought Linda must have been thinking the same thing. They kept moving along at a brisk pace, not looking back.

The asphalt released its heat to their feet, and from the distant mountains the cicadas cried. You couldn't compare it with mid-summer, when the wind was like a hair-dryer blowing on you, perhaps due to the angle of the sun. It was maybe even a little refreshing... maybe. In the warmth, the smell of the green grass of summer filled the air.

Nothing more was heard still as the two entered a convenience store, bought some drinks and sat

down side by side on a parking lot bumper block.

Moistening their parched throats, they remained seated like that for a bit, and Linda finally spoke.

"...If I tell you to, stop it. Understood?"

Understood.

Not knowing right away whether he should go there, Banri simply looked over at Linda's face. Linda, bending her head back took another drink of her sparkling water, and, playing with the bottle in both hands and bursting the bubbles,

"...It was better than total destruction. I was pretending I didn't know anything about what was going on, and until now, things had been going along smoothly. I would have preferred that nothing had happened."

She gave something like an excuse.

Drinking down some of the cold uulong tea, gulping audibly, at long last Banri's voice came out.

"Was it, right?"

In the orange-tinted setting sun, dazzling her half-shut eyes, Linda was looking at the bubbles in her water. Why she was looking down and around at the ground as if she had dropped her sports bag, he had no idea. Answering that way, she put her drink bottle by her feet. She put her chin on her raised knees.

"...Because, but, I had thought I didn't want Ani to be wounded. In that place, I was ready to ‘put an end to all that' and then I... I was really afraid to make Ani sad..."

"That was for Ani's sake!?"

Clutching his plastic bottle so tightly it was collapsing, Banri, looking down at his own shoes, raised his voice.

"You thought that leaving it as it was and pretending not to know would really work out in Ani's favor!? After this, forever!? Would she become family!? Maybe even have kids!? That person as a sister, seeing her as your own older sister!? If your father or mother even saw,"

"Stop it!"

Letting out a cry, Linda put her face between her knees. Quite upset, she covered her hair and ears at the same time with her hands. The way you're told to brace yourself to survive the crash landing of an airplane. The position your body must take in order to survive being slapped down to the ground from however high it had climbed.

"Now, it's like what you said, I agree with you completely! I know! I might have made a mistake! But, it can't be helped, can it! What's done is done!"

Her body shaking as if in denial, Linda was messing up her long hair with her fingers.

"Be... besides, would it have done any good to be so strong...!?"

For certain, nothing would be accomplished by blaming Linda.

Returning to himself, Banri licked his lips. He drank another mouthful of uulong tea. He had not the right to say she had no choice. Linda chose her own course of action, and carried it out. Banri could not take responsibility for the results. It wasn't for him to judge.

Hmph, he thought. ---Speaking of wearing the mask of adult, in short, he wondered what he should say. It was not for him to judge. Having gone along, he had to hold his tongue.

However, underneath that so-called mask, a real face is hidden beneath. He wondered if beneath the mask Linda, after all, still had the face that cried "Tattoo her!" The face she decided to show to no-one.

"...Sorry. I've said too much."

Linda might be crying. A single person carrying the burden of guilt, she may be stricken with grief. Once more calling her, he repeated over and over 'Linda, I'm really sorry', yet she didn't so much as twitch. Almost as if she were moaning, she answered in a feeble voice.

"I've... really made a mess. From now on, I wonder, will I be able to stand it? Ani will live under a deception. And now I am a lying collaborator. I've become a perpetrator. What will I do? What should I do? This is bad. I made a mistake, I did. What will I do? What will I do...?"

"I,"

Banri breathed in, staring at the tense muscles of the back of Linda's neck as he spoke.

"...As for me, I saw... all that. And so, you need not suffer by yourself. Though I may not be reliable, though there may be nothing I can do, but I am there too. I will always be by your side."

He watched constantly. He watched closely. What Linda thought and what she did, what she

mourned, what she did wrong, what she took upon herself. Unable to even share it,

"I absolutely will, because I won't forget."

I will be by your side.

That muttered, the next instant, Linda reached out her hand for the bag Banri had under his arm. Taking it and sticking her face in the bag where his dirty jersey had been stuffed,

"Aaa~~~~~~~~!"

Linda shouted.

Her voice loud and tight, her body shaking, she was screaming. Banri's jersey, dirty with dust and sweat, swallowed up the outcry.

It's okay, said Banri, watching.

What you did is okay.

Shouting is okay. Crying is okay. Linda, you are not alone. I'm right there. Right there, always watching, listening, reacting, remembering for you. Banri again took a deep breath, and squeezed out his voice.

"When you want to shout, when you want to cry, I will always be there by your side. I'll be there with you, sharing the same feelings. Even if it's troublesome, wherever it might be, I will absolutely find you."

"...How will you do that?"

"'How will I do it'... that, I will do whatever it takes. I will always be listening carefully for your voice. When the rain is falling, the wind blowing, the flowers petals fluttering or the shadows looming... whatever may be happening, I will search out your voice. That I will do, I promise you."

You aren't alone. Nobody else knows your hidden grief, your doubts nor your faults. I am here. I know. That is how I want it to be. So felt Banri from the bottom of his heart.

Banri's hand was unexpectedly touched by Linda's little finger as she slowly lowered it. Unable yet to take hold of it, Banri simply, quietly stayed where the fingertip could touch.

It seemed pretty clear that he really loved Linda.

His chest suddenly grew heavy, as if his hot consciousness were seeping down into it.

It would be fun to be together. It wasn't simply that, there were so many more things he wanted

to share. Having wished for that, already he could not stop himself. Linda's fingertip still touched him. If she had noticed, if she moved even a little, it seemed as if all would be broken. Even breathing was scary.

"...Really?"

Where they touched, was becoming like a heart itself. Aching hotly, it throbbed painfully.

Linda's voice repeated 'Really? Really? Really?', trembling without knowing it, her sighs ending.

"...Should I believe you?"

Linda raised her face. Not looking at her face, his voice still not coming out, Banri nodded nervously. To be honest, at that moment he still thought he wanted to ensure an escape route, so that if it wouldn't work, then they could return to being 'ordinary friends'.

He should have looked beforehand. He should have said something. He should have thought about such security.

He should have looked into her eyes and answered her perfectly. If he had done like that, at that time, it might have later developed into something different.

However, it was somewhat later when Banri had those thoughts.

Because her hand had gone beyond reach. Because Ani's problems, the blue and purple hydrangea flowers the two of them saw, the oppressive smells of mid-summer and the dreamily beautiful blue skies of autumn... all was forgotten completely. Because the two of them were separated, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Chapter 1

1

Tada Banri bowed his head to the Kaga parents.

And then I... backed off to get a wider view.

This me is a ghost, having died, but ordinary living humans would have been forced to back off from this point too. This woman, Kaga Kouko. She must be a rather important person.

At any rate, this evening's arrest was a sight to see--- Sticking my ghostly face into it so, I was enjoying myself to the max in other people's problems. What had happened in these past few hours was relevant even to me.

It was about two hours ago.

With such awful offenses: drinking while underage, even stealing a bicycle, she was interrogated in a room at the police station. Banri was with her too. And then, inevitably, as Banri's guardian spirit this me was with them too.

Separated from Kaga Kouko by the several policewomen guiding her, he proceeded uncomfortably under the cold flourescent lamps and was led into a room with some small sofas squeezed in.

The room didn't look like it was "for criminals," even the door was ajar. Even though it was the middle of the night, there were people hurrying in and out, and noisy offices nearby. It seemed to be a space for having meetings.

He was made to wait there for a little while. No, quite a while.

Up to that point the very picture of hesitation, looking around nervously, Banri had become the incarnation of nervousness, jumping even when he was given some tea. Before long, one after another, a bunch of rough-looking middle-aged guys in windbreakers, punch-perms and radios firmed fixed to their hips appeared, saying "Well, well." They passed them papers and told them, "Write clearly, OK?" Made to write his name and address, in the space of one breath his good fortune fading, his nervousness returned and he began to tremble.

So that's how it was. Even he was nervous. Scared, even. Would these signed documents remain his whole life? Would these not haunt him when he went to find a job? He was caught like that when suddenly and ominously, the ring of an incoming phone call echoed through the floor.

'Errr,' Banri's mouth opened and a feeble voice came out. His face fell into a servile smile.

"Is she being arrested...? I, I, I mean, well, though I am to blame... per, perhaps..."

With nobody sitting in the sofa facing him, the old guys--- the police officers in the prime of their lives, were bending over to stare Banri straight in the face. Banri, in desperation, spoke as honestly as he could.

With his fellow classmates from college, though they were underage, had against better judgement gone out drinking. In retrospect, it was a disaster. There were problems related to his memory loss, and to the stress of the preceding days. Perhaps persuaded by his drinking, he had dashed outside to the dangerous streets. Kaga Kouko, before causing her own accident, desperately chased after him to ensure his safety. However, unable to keep up on foot, requisitioned the bicycle temporarily, or rather, borrowed it. The result turned out like this.

They had caused a lot of trouble, both for the owner of the bicycle, and for the public in general.

"...Really... I am very sorry...!"

While sunken in the sofa, leaning forwards, Banri suddenly bowed his head. It might turn out pretty bad if he told them exactly where they had been drinking... Of course, nobody noticed me, anxiously by Banri's side. With regards to the responsibility for the underage drinking, even the club might be implicated.

'Hmph,' they could not see his emotions, but his voice carried strangely well, and one of the police officers nodded.

Made to write the address and phone number of his home in Shizuoka, his parent's cell-phone numbers and the name of his hospital on a fresh sheet of paper, Banri's hand holding the ballpoint pen trembled shamefully. He calmed down, but the hand holding the paper was trembling, and getting as cold as mine. If this body had substance, my hands would be sweating like crazy for sure. Forms in hand, the police officers left the room.

And then, when a little more time had passed, he noticed two shadowy human forms hurrying towards the still open door. At the sound of footsteps, Banri's face and mine both rose, but by that time already nothing could be seen. He realized they were speaking of Kouko, something and 'idiot'. He wondered if they were Kouko's parents.

Just then a policeman stuck his head in, "Tada Mari, no... Banri. Your parents are already headed here." --- 'Really!?' I shouted. As for the fleshly Banri, he looked up at the ceiling in silence and covered his face in his hands. He slid from the sofa, falling to the carpet as if he were kneeling.

Even his parents had been called...

By car? By bullet train? No, it didn't matter which, or how they did it... aaahhh. Aaaahhh. It's come to that, he thought.

Their son: causing such trouble, nearly dying (almost like me), worrying them sick, yet trusted and sent to Tokyo, was currently under arrest.

How badly must you disappoint your parents, Tada Banri? Or rather, me.

However, only a few minutes from that information, the same police officer (it seemed)

reappeared,

"Your parents, they've turned back."

"...Yes!?"

This time, Banri slipped down from the couch.

With the sudden appearance of her parents, you could say that Kaga Kouko's release from custody was settled. And so, with no blame attached to him, returning home quickly, he wouldn't drink anymore until he was an adult.

If he could have heard, the high-schooler victim in presenting his case for reimbursement had demanded "the most generous of settlements", so to speak. And what's more, that her friend's, that is to say Banri's, guarantee of special consideration for his so-called memory loss be dismissed. What's more, it seemed to have been made a big consideration. Kaga Kouko, also, was reflecting deeply on her actions.

And then even more, her parents were very respected doctors in the area, and as leading members of the Men's Club had contributed to society for many years. They said they would strictly supervise their daughter's behavior from now on.

Under such circumstances, it would be a miracle if she were to get off with only a light reprimand, and so on.

The Kaga household followed right behind the policemen, and upon leaving the lobby they finished up. Banri stopped without thinking, and I collided with his back. That hurt, I tried to tell the back of his head, but of course there was no reply.

Saying "We are very sorry. Our daughter has caused you so much trouble," their bodies bent nearly double, repeatedly bowing their heads, her parents seemed to be much older than his own, but their clothing showed incredibly good taste. Ordinary middle-aged men and women around here--- say, for instance, Tada Katsuhiro or Mieko-chan--- were quite clearly of a different class. That much was obvious to anybody's eyes, and to a spirit's eyes.

And then, behind the two of them, there was Kaga Kouko.

Her head hanging dejectedly, the torn knee of her tights had been repaired with a bandaid. Her flower-patterned chiffon mini-dress was stained darkly, and bandages could be seen on her white elbows and on her cheek, visible through a gap in her long falling hair. Her high-heels were hanging from her hand by their straps, and on her feet were slippers. Without heels, she was shorter, and looked completely dispirited.

"Kaga-san! Are you OK!?"

Banri spoke up without thinking.

It was at that moment.

Pfft. Making an impolite noise, the lobby's automatic door opened and the night breeze blew inside strongly. The turned-around Kouko's long hair was blown high upwards with a whoosh, like something out of a girly promotional video. From there, everything else was in slow motion.

She located Banri, and twice, three times, shook her disheveled hair wildly, and struck a pose---squinting as if looking into the distance and opening her lips partway, she held her disordered hair back from her nose lightly with one hand while softly biting the tip of her little finger. With the suppleness of a she-panther she twisted her waist, put her other hand to her hip, and then,

"Mon bien-aimé."

She was whispering. Quickly. Ecstatically.

Buhaa! Banri suddenly exploded magnificently, splashing and spraying all over. Drained of strength, I crumbled to my knees. Kouko's mother pulled her hard by the belt attached to her dress, as if it were a leash.

Kouko grunted once when she was yanked back trying to get closer to Banri, but she wasn't perturbed.

Once again a pose... at a 45-degree angle. Fixing up her hair while flashing a smile. Leaning her twisted body, she spoke, her moist eyes glittering. Her chest, pushed by her arm, rose suddenly as if pushed out.

"Doesn't it feel rather like we're already having the meeting with the family?"

That the police didn't stop him was perhaps due to the speed of his fist, or a reluctance to judge. Kouko's father's right fist knocked an awful dent in the back of his boy-crazy daughter's head. *Crack!* At the sound echoing from her skull, Banri automatically drew back, and I disappeared behind Banri. As for Kaga Kouko, did she say "The cops... don't they stop so much as a mosquito?" or no, was it "Come to think of it, why are we still here?" She suddenly turned lightly back towards her parents and,

"Hey papa, mama, this is my boyfriend, Tada Banri-kun. Isn't he a cool guy?"

Looking quite happy, she pointed towards Banri.

Up to that moment, Kouko's parents had not yet spoken of being tired. Transported as she was, to an extreme those who dwell in my world would not find funny, her parents looked wordlessly at their broken-down daughter, their shoulders drooping.

And then Banri,

"..."

He could see that her parents were at their limit, exhausted, their heads hanging silently.

It was too many things at once, emotional and physical tatters strewn about. They couldn't even open their mouths any more.

And then I pulled back to take in the big picture.

He hadn't decided to start going out with that awful woman, had he?

Before, in this me's life, Tada Banri's, there was this girl. She was my beloved. Just now, in tears, their emotions overflowing, promising each other, these had vowed together to become an official couple.

Anyway, unable, of course, to ask such a presumptuous favor as "Could you drive me to my apartment?" Banri headed for the station by himself, as if he were fleeing, hunched over like a shrimp.

It was nearly the last train, horribly crowded inside. Jostled by drunks, Banri planted his feet firmly, closed his eyes intently, and endured the confusion and jolting.

Indeed, for things to turn out like this--- I don't know how many thousands, how many tens of thousands of times over again, I was pushed into Banri's back the very same way.

Of course, the biggest "indeed" to this point has been my death.

Having an accident, falling from a bridge shortly after graduation from high school, I, or rather my substance, was expelled from my body by the shock. That which had existed for the eighteen years up to that point as Tada Banri could no longer return, the empty body was diagnosed with "memory loss", and a new life emerged. And then I... became a casualty. As a drifting soul, no longer visible, existing like that, always at Banri's side.

As it was, he wasn't going to entertain any notions as to just how bad a relationship the living Banri was headed for.

His cell-phone buzzed, a text-message having arrived. Though he didn't want to move his arm, he opened his phone anyhow to check it. It was from his mother. With continuing details from home, it said, "We turned back before the Yoshida interchange, and we're already home." Not hitting 'reply', Banri stuffed his phone back into his pocket.

"Excuse me for worrying," his mother said over the phone while he was waiting for the train, her voice sounding very tired. "Though I intend to worry about you your whole life long," he had been told.

Not replying to the text, there were still two more. The sender for both of them: Hayashida Nana.

Linda.

---Linda.

Banri looked at the window he was facing. In the gaps between people's heads, the dark Tokyo night could be seen. Tada Banri's face, reflected in the glass, was alone, naturally.

A young, tired male face. A bad son. Tada Banri, restored to life. Taking a hard look at himself, Banri's eyes relented just a little. Looking embarassed, he gave a thin smile, but then right away a thoughtful shadow crossed his face. Little by little, the smile faded away. His gaze sadly downcast, his face reflected in the glass shook back and forth as if he were watching other people.

Thinking about his new lover, and then about his future, he's probably getting lost in confusion and fatigue.

Banri thinks of me as some kind of evil spirit, something scary--- something that despises his very existence, and is trying to drag him off into the world of the dead.

While watching my own face reflected back at me by the dark glass, I spoke softly to Banri's ear.

I've never thought of you reproachfully.

I've already resigned myself to how things have turned out. I have never thought of wanting you to die. I've not been trying to pursue you, to run you down.

Of course, there is no doubt that I am "The Ghost of the Past."

But I don't even have a reason for staying here. Thinking that I am chasing you down, about the stress of the situation, I say to myself, "There's no way I can have a healthy life from now on." It's a negative pressure, so to speak. Showing weariness of the soul (surely an illusion without substance), kind of. It's a bad dream.

Still, I simply cannot help but be here. Because I cannot disappear, I cannot help but be. That's all there is to it, really.

* * *

"Lord Ro~me~o~"

Something pure white reached towards him from the corner of his eye,

"It's time for Juliet to come on stage."

"...You..."

Suddenly Banri's left arm was entwined. Sticking to him tightly like that,

"...surprised me...! I thought somebody was sticking a *mochi* to me as a prank!"

"I am not a rice-cake."

It's me, *c'est moi*,

"I'm Kouko, your woman, your Juliet!"

A broad smile and upturned eyes.

Kouko, the white hand that had been mistaken for a *mochi* clinging tightly to Banri's arm still, made her eyes sparkle.

"Good morning, Tada-kun."

"Goo..."

His tongue tied, embarrassed, this time it was Banri who turned into a *mochi*. Smiling slackly with his whole face, his expression began to slowly melt and fall, and as ever Kouko smiled too. The two of them gazed at each other, *mochi* to *mochi*.

"...Good morning, Kaga-san."

Kouko said "good morning" once more. Banri echoed it back again. They laughed together.

Like that.

That one night unlocked the present. The two of them had started their official relationship, becoming boyfriend and girlfriend. In the school of life, being called "a couple" should earn you a credit.

Holding each other's hands, they felt like spinning round and round at this place. Though they didn't, already all the world was turning into a stage for the two of them.

This traffic jam as an orchestra, that fluorescent lamp a spot-light. This crowd as a parade of blessing, the beep of the ticket gate an angel checking out a trumpet. Looking into each other's eyes, holding hands, shrouding each other in warmth, a moment in eternity... in his nose the rich fragrance of rose eau-de-toilette sweetly overflowing, Banri would go weak in the knees. First thing in the morning, right away.

In love as he was and continued to be, it'd be fine if he fell down in front of Her Majesty's beautiful face, if she wanted him to. But this morning, just before 8:30 in the morning, the ticket gate of the nearest station to the university was the stage for the new couple's debut, at the precise time the school commute was at it's worst.

For the people going to and fro, crowded together horribly in this narrow place, stopped in a passageway, two mochi staring at each other were an infinite nuisance. If it was an older's person's throat, then the sound of the angel's trumpet was not a message of love, but just an unexpected cry of welcome. Suddenly blocking the flow of people,

"Ah, excuse us! Oh no! Sorry!"

For the most part, the bags and elbows of the angry people pummeled Banri on his back and rump. They took the opportunity to run over his feet with their carry-ons, not even excusing themselves, even making disapproving noises. Banri turned around to face them as fast as he could, apologizing while he hurriedly bent backwards, standing tiptoed, bending his body in a vain attempt to stop obstructing the flow of people.

Off to one side, Kouko maintained her pose.

"You know I waited here thirty minutes in order to say 'Good Morning?'"

She grabbed hold of the arm of Banri's shirt with both hands, tilting her head to one side, like a child pestering somebody for a toy, her adorable, large eyes sparkling.

"Thirty minutes? You waited in a place like this? You could've sent me a text..."

"I wanted to show my love. Look, err... it's like that... fuzzy thing..."

"Fuzzy?"

"It died waiting for Richard Gere..."

Showing him, Kouko brought both her softly clasped hands before her face, stuck out her tongue, said "he he he he" and looked up at Banri.

"E, e, e? D, dog?"

"Yes, a dog! Isn't it in Shibuya? Look, that dog..."

"Eh...? Are you by chance talking about Hachiko?"

"That's it, fantastic, Tada-kun! We understand each other, of course!"

Kyaa! He stared at Kouko as the lonely faithful dog, but a huge question mark was dancing around inside Banri's head. Why'd she come out with Hachiko, no, a dog, he couldn't figure out.

No, no. Wait, wait, before that,

"Waited for Richard Gere... what was that about? That was maybe the first time I'd heard of it."

"Hahaa"

Kouko poked Banri's chest lightly with her index finger. "I knew it," she said, chuckling.

"You're imagining right now, inside your head, Saigou-san's dog!"

Not even being given the time to deny it,

"That one, in U-e-no. But in that case, nobody died waiting. Probably. So, let's go sometime! Take a look at Saigou-san, stroll around Ueno Park and Shinobazu Pond, walk around the art museums, and take the time we have left to see the zoo. We can skip the panda. But what a fun date it would be! Hmm, in that area, what people are out in the open air are a few and far between, though wouldn't you say they're also 'part of the scenery'?"

"In other words Ueno, I... ah, whoa...!"

Struck on the shoulder from behind by a blood-thirsty salaryman, Banri stumbled forward.

The next train leaving the platform, an ever more numerous crowd of people descended on them en masse from the ticket gate. With Banri and Kouko just standing there, facing the transfer gate, right in the middle of passage Y, just standing and talking without a care in the world, they seemed to be preventing them from getting through.

"For now, let's walk! Let's move along! We're being a nuisance... waa, sorry, I stepped on your foot!"

While taking the lead and heading out, he tried to take Kouko's hand in a manly way. However, the narrow passageway being crowded, and soon the flow of people had separated him from Kouko.

Moving helplessly forward, he was about to escape to the side of the station to wait for her a bit. Kouko, falling out of the crowd a moment later,

"Phew... Wasn't today's rush hour a bit worse than usual?"

She straightened up her slightly mussed up hair.

"It looks like the subway was running a little late, maybe that's why."

Banri tried to casually take Kouko's hand, but,

"Oh, that reminds me."

Unnoticed, Kouko had her hand deep into her bag, rummaging around for something. It looked as if she were making sure her wallet was OK, that it hadn't been lifted. And then, noticing that Banri had his hand held out,

"Eh?"

With an innocent face, she tilted her head to one side in curiosity.

"...Hmm?"

What? Though it doesn't matter? My hand was just about to scratch my head--- Strangely embarrassed that it wasn't moving, Banri pretended to scratch his head.

It was a mystery to him how he could have taken her hand so naturally just a bit ago, but now he couldn't, once more the awkward kid. The jostling and confusion must have acted to create a good mood. If that's so, and he could take her hand properly during the next rush-hour, then he had better not let go for a lifetime.

For the time being giving up on holding hands at school, Banri and Kouko stopped shoulder to shoulder in front of a pedestrian crossing. Closing her sparkling eyes a bit, Kouko said "I'm going to need a parasol soon" and held a white hand over her face. The beautiful gemstones of her rings sparkled on her slim fingers.

Today's weather being thin white clouds, Banri laughed "You're exaggerating," and stared at her. "Yes it burns, it really burns, or rather I'm being roasted," said Kouko, her hand still lifted up, stubbornly shaking her head side to side.

According to the television weather forecast, the Okinawa region was already entering into their rainy season, but in the heart of Tokyo there wasn't so much as a wind blowing, and today was strangely warm. The temperature would likely rise from now on, and what's more, he noticed the humidity was going up. Under a long-sleeve shirt, Banri's skin was wet already.

Crossing elegantly at the green light in her high-heels, Kouko peeked at Banri's face a little mischievously.

"Tomorrow I'm going to ambush you in front of your apartment. With a parasol and ThreePlus SPF 50 UV sunblock."

"By all means, by all means. Or rather, I could do without the ambush part though. If we go to school together, then we can try to calm ourselves down in a quiet place half-way there. ...Ah, just kidding. A noisy place is fine, of course. Squeezed to death by the crowds, in a busy spot."

"Because, I love..."

Going behind the narrow street's guard-rail, they walked one behind the other.

Casually checking his appearance reflected in the glass fronts of the aptitude test prep schools, Banri looked back at Kouko's white face, following close behind him. He indeed looked like a stalker. She must really love whatever she's searching for with that hand, like a private eye busy at his craft, but coming to a realization,

"...Tada-kun."

At the unexpectedly sweet words, his feet stopped automatically. I love you. Tada-kun.

"For that reason, appointments are forbidden. I don't want to waste so much as one second, one meter. I want to be together with Tada-kun from the first step of the beginning of every day, from the first second."

Kouko passed by the halted Banri, stepping out in front in her high-heels. Looking back, tilting her head in query, she asked "What's wrong? Shouldn't we hurry?"

This is only the beginning... there's a long way to go yet... and he would try to be equal to the task, and yet he found his face heating. Unable to keep a straight face, Banri laughed. A huge grin on his face, head over heels in love, turning into a mochi, at such a level he'd never seen before,

"Wahahahahahahaha!"

A laugh from deep in his belly, he laughed as hard as he could. He laughed loudly. He shook all the way to his clasped hands. Even standing lightly on his tip-toes.

The busy people going to and fro in the narrow way early in the morning did their best to ignore them, walking around at a good distance from the loudly laughing students, with their bizarre expressions, daunting stance and deep breathing.

While he was laughing, Banri was thinking.

He wondered when, normally, one would get used to it? Loving somebody, being loved by somebody, to that reality. His current self, at least, was not at all used to it. He could hardly believe that he and Kouko were going out together. Too happy, having too much fun, he couldn't help but laugh like an idiot.

Kouko laughed too, smiling, and waited for Banri, who continued laughing loudly, to return to sanity. Not Banri, nor in fact any other person passing by, seemed to be able to ignore the dazzling woman. Once more he thought, marveling: how could such a person as this love me?

Kaga Kouko was perfect. The gods selected her spirit, deliberately and carefully, giving her literally perfect form.

Look at her. Those finely shaped features, her beautiful looks.

Her womanly curves arched like a standing bow, in beautiful style. Graceful legs and feet. A delicate frame. Muscles softly outlined in shadow.

Polished milk-colored skin, a gaze that seemed to burn everything it saw and a shiny, deep red rose-colored lip gloss. The contrast between them dramatically and definitively highlighted the beauty of her face.

Next, she was wearing a long silk and linen cardigan. Slender pants which emphasized her figure and high-heeled sandals that seemed works of art. Her bag was slung from her shoulder, black calfskin leather rather squashed, perhaps due to a pocket copy of the Six Codes.

Today she had done her dark brown hair in wavy curls, with a bright emerald green silk scarf substituting for a headband hanging partway down her back in "Kaga Kouko Indeed" style. Recently, the college girls were all wearing hair-bands and scarves, something Banri thought was due to Kouko's influence. It may have been popular only around here, but at least amongst Banri's group of students, the style was introduced first by Kouko, and spread from her.

So. The woman is all-around perfect. Everybody is aware of her. Everyone looks at her.

Blessed with exceptionally good looks by nature, having good taste, unsparing of time, money or trouble, Kouko was desparately polishing herself by degrees, attaining to a state of perfect beauty. Making the effort, spending the money, taking the time, having done all those things in preparation, Kouko was now in a specially blessed place. No, if you speak of blessed, there was one more thing--- to the extent that the upper class barrier protects a person from bad things, she has not been hurt even once.

On the other hand, with regards to Banri...

Without realizing it, his laughter stopped. He looked down upon the fool he was becoming. Without even checking again in the glass wall, his was just another unrefined form.

Apart from his second-hand denims, his whole body was armored in UNIQLO, his bag hung at a slant, his Jack Purcells worn. Spiced by Koenji, brought to life at Shimokitazawa, defeated in Harajuku, he was getting blasé about branding... a typical, ordinary person's outlook carried to an extreme, he felt. Looking stylish in mass produced goods, a vague fellow that could be found anywhere. A boy punched out by a stamping press in God's subcontractor's subcontractor's subcontractor's subcontractor's factory by an old guy naked from the waist, looking the other way, a cigarette stuck into the gap where one of his front teeth had been knocked out. That was Tada Banri.

He wasn't even thinking about whether such a self would really be good for a girl's boyfriend. Which wasn't to say that he wasn't thinking. To get along together well, you need to match! He hadn't had such thoughts at first.

Hadn't, and yet,

"...As for me, getting to date Kaga-san makes me happy..."

That was the reality.

He really was dating Kouko. Without thinking about it, he murmured earnestly, as if he were chewing on his joy.

"Come now, Tada-kun..."

Kouko, moving her hand to her chest, looked back at Banri and suddenly looked sad, as if she were about to cry. Banri reached out nervously, trying to touch her shoulder softly. Even from so little as that, Kouko's eyes sparkled even more brightly, like wet gemstones.

"...I could go to meet you at your house every day, for sure. I wasn't the one who said, 'I wouldn't want to waste one second.' So as to not wander about too much, just where was the nearest station? If I can be with you, be it to ambush you or to stalk you, whatever you like."

However,

"Ah, err..."

Suddenly, sticking out her lower lip as much as Matsumoto Seichou, a strange look on her face, Kouko separated herself from him. Spinning on her heel, she started walking towards campus.

"What was that all of a sudden?"

"It's rather hard to say..."

Looking back a little awkwardly,

"Coming over to our place, not good..."

That's right. Sigh...

He forced a haphazard smile. Chasing after her, Banri called "Hold on!"

"Eh, not good!? What's this: planning to stalk me is OK, but for me to do it back is not allowed!? How selfish!"

"You misunderstand! It's not what you think. It's just, my parents don't want to see us hanging around together, it looks like..."

"Don't want to see, us!?"

While chasing quickly after Kouko, who didn't seem to want to talk straight, it suddenly dawned on Banri. His heart beating hard, he covered his mouth.

We're from different classes, they have their so-called way. 'Our Kouko and this idiot are out of control already! Isn't what's happening typical? You can't be friends with such an unknown boy, who made you steal a bicycle. Besides, he lost his memory.'

"Wow... are you serious!? They're against us going out!? No way! I'm perfectly harmless! Please smooth things over with your parents! No way, parents against our dating, there's absolutely no way, no way no way no way!"

For the happiness so hard to find, that he had at long last caught hold of, to be cut lose this way---!? Such a determined resistance was going to turn the somewhat annoying Banri into a real problem. No way no way no way no way! The way things were, their upper bodies swingly wildly forward, he and Kouko were coming together quickly and simultaneously. While casually placing her hand as a guard, Kouko uncomfortably pointed at herself.

"Whoa there, Tada-kun. Calm down. People are watching. Besides, there's the other side of it. It's a problem for me."

The other side...? Giving a big nod towards the confused Banri,

"So it is. They told me not to get close to you. Because if my strangeness stuck to you, your life was going to go amiss. They told me to go pick a new target!"

"The old target... Yana-ssan?"

Turning suddenly, he wondered if the way her big eyes could be seen spinning was an affirmation.

"Speaking out of turn, I even made problems for you this time. Or rather, after yesterday, enough already! How! Awful! You were scolded... your nose seems nearly bloodied... well, it isn't showing though."

'Oh,' holding her tongue in front of Banri, Kouko let out a sigh once more. Her shoulders sagged, downhearted.

"Between Father and Mother, in the end, they were talking about locking me up in a cell."

"Huh? You have a lockup? Isn't it enough that you have poisonous snakes? Wow, incredible, Tokyo's Mystery Zone..."

"We don't, of course. And that's probably why I'm a free woman. But, when for a moment my mother happened to look towards where she stores things under the floor, I was a bit, nervous."

After politely making a pose like a runner, Kouko took the lead and went up the stairs to the law building lobby. Pushing open the glass door, the two of them walked happily side by side into the confined atmosphere there.

Sleepy-looking students were leaving from there in twos and threes, apparently from first-period, carrying heavy-looking bags.

If he thought back to the confusion of when he'd just entered college, it seemed to him as if there were fewer people this morning. It might even be a more appropriate number of people, given the original smallness of the central city campus.

Kouko looked at her wristwatch, and once more let out a sigh.

"So, we truly have some difficulties in store. Romi-Juli it is. We cannot even be dating in open opposition to our parents, like poor Romeo and Juliet. ...Eventually even we, might even take poison together."

Banri was about to reply, 'But those two people poisoned themselves separately...' when she looked up at him,

"That reminds me, what about your parents? Did they talk to you from there yesterday? Weren't you able to say anything about us going out together?"

"No, nothing about you."

Kouko noted, "That so?"

It was last night that he'd talked with his parents. Once from the train station platform. And then he called one more time when he got to his room.

It wasn't all that much, but saying things like "There's a girl I've started going out with, and she was accused of stealing a kid's bicycle!" ...wouldn't give the right impression. How it happened they were detained by the police was not something to be explained easily, but he'd decided to say that the actors in the drama were himself and a "friend from school."

Of course, he hadn't said, "Linda was at the drinking party at the same time, the very Linda I'd been close friends with before losing my memory! I said 'Why were you pretending not to know me?' and we fought just as in the beginning."

Maybe, if he'd said such a thing, then either way they'd get to worrying too much about him being in Tokyo, he thought.

In fact, it seemed that Banri himself had gotten that way, one way or the other, and for that very reason, that mess... the bicycle theft, were to get out, he might have been told to return home already to Shizuoka, he thought.

In fact, Banri was afraid of that.

Already, he wanted to give Tokyo a good try. Things here and there were beginning to turn out difficult, and there were days where everything went every which way, and yet, somehow, he

wanted to settle down here. He wanted to plant himself here and not give up.

That reason, of course,

"Well, that may have helped us, just a bit. If both sets of parents were against us, there wouldn't be much we could do."

Walking beside him was a woman. Beautiful hair lightly brushed up, Kaga Kouko smiled at Banri. This gorgeous lover was from Tokyo.

But, with a pile of problems,

"But hey, though I wasn't stuffed into a cell, they did take my credit card."

He couldn't explain everything to Kouko. He had no choice but to manage it himself. Thinking like that, and at the same time of some other matters, a certain personage of shadow floated across his brain and suddenly his heart was full to overflowing. But he kept his face still, and his voice as it had been until now.

"Oops. Is that so?"

Tada Banri's carefree face, caught up in the moment.

That so? Shugging her shoulders, Kouko pursed her lips adorably.

"For the time being, though I've got my pass card, we can't use it for a taxi. I can't go shopping either. Nor can I go to a restaurant or a beauty salon. It's not too different from being in jail, this is."

"Ah, then perhaps Ueno Park? Coming from you, I had thought that an inexpensive suggestion."

"For now, the train fare and tea money is all I have to play with... but the weather's good. How about it?"

"As for me, I've not been to Ueno. I want to see the park, at least. Afterwards, Ameyoko? That kinda thing."

"Really? Then it's decided! Next Saturday, it's a date to Ueno!"

"Then it's settled. If the weather's good, we're set. I mean, if I could say 'I'll take care of it!' at a time like this, it'd be really great. But I'm a wretch who's almost always broke..."

"It's OK, it's OK, not a problem." Kouko waved it off. "We'll go Dutch."

Kouko didn't even need to be told that basically, with the reality of their financial condition, if they didn't split the cost, they wouldn't be able to do anything, but,

"I suppose I ought to look seriously for a part time job, I should."

He remembered that in local convenience stores and taverns, there were help-wanted posters. Even some used book stores had them, if he remembered correctly.

Because it could not be said that he had a perfectly healthy body, his parents told him to devote himself entirely to his studies. They did, but if he asked for enough allowance so he could entirely devote himself as he had been told, the answer was also no.

"A job? Then we'd have less time together."

Opening her big eyes wide, Kouko stood tiptoed as if she were jumping. She brought her face close to Banri, pouting a little.

"Well, whatever, it was something that occurred to me. Everything's undecided. Speaking of which, what's the time?"

Kouko turned her wrist towards Banri, here, showing him her silver watch's tiny dial, but

"So small! It's hard to see!"

"It isn't hard to see! Look, isn't it clearly showing 8:45?"

In the little speck of a watch-face, he could only just make out the little hands. Taking hold of Kouko's wrist, he brought it close to his face, peering closely to check the time somehow,

"46 after, sure is. Wouldn't it be easier for a person to see clearly if it were a little bigger? Wouldn't it be better if the hands were like somebody jumping, like Conan-kun? It would fit, absolutely. Somebody doesn't like you, you zap them."

"Eh!? No such thing, or rather, no way! This is good! Isn't it cute!? Isn't it a Cartier Mini Panthere!? It's already been discontinued, so it wasn't easy to get! It's valuable!"

"Mini panties."

"Kyaa!"

Kouko shouted, playfully laughing, and then she clapped Banri's shoulder.

"Speaking of such things, you really like that!?"

With about the same force, he clapped her shoulder back while he laughed too.

"But that Conan-kun guy is really hard to find. Anyway, what shall we do? Head for lecture already? First period, I've got English, but Kaga-san, what'd you have?"

"French"

"Since we've got about ten minutes, shouldn't we kill the last of them in the cafeteria?"

Just saying dumb things somehow strangely fun, Banri found it hard to let go of Kouko. Kouko seemed to be thinking about the same way, so at Banri's invitation, she nodded with a happy smile.

Banri's first period was English. He was taking it together with Yana-ssan and Two Dimensions. It came to mind that there was a chance running into one or the other in the cafeteria, but saying 'It should be OK,' Banri continued walking. He had no particular intention of hiding that he and Kouko were starting to date like this. There wasn't any necessity of doing so, right?

...There wasn't, was there?

When he started thinking, he unintentionally tilted his head to one side, as if puzzled.

When she was recklessly confessed to at the drinking party, Oka Chinami cruelly rejected Yanagisawa Mitsuo. Banri felt that the wound to Mitsuo's heart had some ways to go before it healed, of course.

He wondered if wouldn't be awfully insensitive of him, to the point of disqualifying him as a friend, to wear a face like "We've just started going out, and are at the peak of happiness!" in front of him.

But, quietly lying for Mitsuo's sake, hiding the fact that they were dating as if it were an act of friendship... he had a feeling it was still somehow wrong.

He had a hunch that having a discussion like "Hey, hey Kaga-san, what shall we dooo~? Wouldn't it be pitiful, talking to Yana-ssan about how lovey-dovey we are~? Shall we hide it~?" would be a big mistake. Even without talking so affectedly, somehow, flirting openly wasn't going to help Mitsuo's bad mood.

To make matters yet more difficult, there was the reason for Mitsuo confessing when he did. To anybody else's point of view, it was just too unreasonable. Banri, for one, didn't think it was something provoked by Kouko.

Not even saying such things as 'What's a state Kouko and I are in now~, We're so happy~'... if he was trying to do some good for Mitsuo, then he was in for some discomfort.

Well then, if he were asked 'Are you hiding something?', then he felt there wasn't anything being hidden.

Getting to where he didn't know what to do, Banri, practically in reflex, was about to change their course towards the cafeteria. It was just then, while they were still in the lobby, as he tried to change Kouko's heading.

He saw it there, in the back of the lobby.

The area in front of the student affairs office bulletin board. At the table that had become the gathering place of the Omaken were several figures. Kouko must've noticed it too,

"Oh yeah, we didn't apologize to the senpais about yesterday, did we? Though I've sent a text to Linda-senpai for the time being, shouldn't we give her a better explanation?"

"N, no no, no..."

Banri desperately shook his head from side to side, hiding his trembling and forcing himself to laugh. Turning around once more, he turned towards the staircase, heading towards the cafeteria as he had previously intended. Just who was at that table, he didn't know. He hadn't been able to see clearly that far. But, his heart was suddenly beating hard enough to break. It was still impossible. His heart was not ready yet.

He couldn't yet look into that person's face.

"...Let's, let's do it later. Later, later. Another time."

Not knowing what he should do, to the nth degree, he turned towards the cafeteria, feeling that as things were he'd much rather run into Mitsuo.

* * *

When they opened the lid, or rather, when they opened the cafeteria door and looked inside, there was Two Dimensions, at a table in the corner, alone, looking down at his preparations for English class.

He was tidy, wearing a short-sleeved shirt, chino pants and his usual glasses. His face looked tired still, a little bit puffy. Feeling a little bit relieved, "Hey", Banri called out to him,

"Hey Banri"

Raising his head from the texts and turning his pen to Banri's face,

"...and, Kaga-san... is it...?"

The pen-tip slid over to the side, right beside Banri.

"Morning, Two Dimensions."

Two Dimensions looked back and forth many times between the perfectly smiling Kouko and Banri, who had a slightly vacuous smile, comparing the two of them, and then,

"...What's going on...? For some reason... it feels like... you're a couple?"

Pulling off his glasses, he folded his arms.

"Yana-ssan not here yet?"

Without even answering Banri, he uttered a sharp "Tsk!", then getting the better of himself, he leisurely pulled out the chair next to him,

"...For the moment, here you go Kaga-san, set it there. Man, your bag looks heavy."

"Thank you."

Kouko was seated there. As if she were royalty indeed, Kouko sat down gracefully in the chair next to Two Dimensions. 'Err, me, me, my chair,' Banri looked around restlessly,

"Banri, hold on. Are you humbling yourself even to the floor over there?"

...What? It was like he was being given the time for a verbal comeback.

"Well then, Kaga-san, would that be OK if I asked you a little question?"

ゴールデンタイム3
GOLDEN TIME
In the School Cafeteria at Morning

Two Dimensions, behaving quite as if he were a doctor, or a counselor, turned his chair around so as to face directly towards Kouko. Kouko, with a graceful gesture, turned a bit towards the still standing Banri, and sent him a meaningful wink,

"All right? Whatever you want?"

Fully composed, she looked back to Two Dimensions eyes.

Putting on a show of blinking, fluttering her eyelashes, you could see her deep eye shadow. It was a deep, dramatic brown, as if in one look the world were to end.

However, today Two Dimensions wasn't defeated by Kouko's gaze. He took off his glasses and confronted her.

"Is it so?"

"That you just happened to be at the station, and all that?"

"No? I was there to ambush Tada-kun?"

"Did you want to return some money you'd borrowed, or some such special circumstance?"

"Is something wrong? That I ambushed him because I wanted to ambush him?"

"Would you please stop replying in questions to my questions?"

"Though it's OK?"

Saying that, Kouko knew quite well what she was doing.

'Fufun,' smiling happily, she looked at Two Dimensions while twirling the ends of the hair that spilled down to her chest around her finger. Settling her weight to the back of the chair, she stared at Two Dimensions in some respects defiantly while she slowly crossed her legs--- her smile was ice, if she wasn't wearing panties certainly. In all the world, how many tens of thousands, indeed, how many hundreds of millions of times had scenes just like this been played over and over again?

'If there's something you want to say, go ahead' was written on Kouko's beautiful face. I have no plans of hiding anything, it said. But since it will be known sooner or later, there's nothing can be done, right? Right? That's the way it is, right? It certainly is! So said the eyes looking at Banri. Along with what she didn't say all said the same, self-assertively, like a woman.

Even Two Dimensions looked fleetingly over at the still-silent Banri. Banri shrugged his shoulders lightly, answering "it is as you see."

"...Eh, really? Truly? Is it so?"

Two Dimensions said it quickly, as if muttering, and once more looked at Kouko's face.

Banri was thinking, "Speak a little more clearly."

So, they couldn't just hide it behind a blush. If it's going to be known anyway, then shout it out. There wasn't a reason for hesitating about whether to hide things or not from Two Dimensions--- and they were hiding it from Mitsuo, but not from Two Dimensions, which he had simply not been thinking of doing... Having come to this point, he wondered if he could no longer turn back.

We! Are! So! Dating!

In the Kaga Kouko arrangement of the score, that word was raised dramatically, to the highest level. Be the heroine to your heart's content. Whatever role you want to play was fine, be it a poisoned Juliet or a pantiless murderer.

However, contrary to what Banri was thinking, Kouko was silent. Still not saying anything, she took plenty of time, teasingly teasing them to the max, and then,

"..."

Fwip.

She opened the front of her long cardigan. Seen from the side it was, to perfection, like a flasher encountered along the road--- it had the right speed, the right abruptness, that kind of feel... but,

"Ooh..."

When it was shown to Two Dimensions, he shuddered. The heroine, as if content with the result, closed her eyes and smiled.

Inside the cardigan Kouko was holding open, a huge heart-mark had been painted. On a white T-shirt that fit her body tightly, showing the outline of her soft, full bust, right in the middle, with bright red beads crowded together tightly and glittering, a big heart-mark had been sewn.

It was a very lovey-dovey T-shirt that hardly any normal person would wear.

But Kouko, who wore it well, while turning towards Banri,

"*Je, t'ai…*"

Chewing on her full lower lip, she slowly traced the heart with the fingertips of both hands from the bottom up. Drawing Banri's gaze, they followed the two rounded paths without hurrying. Kouko's fingers met at the top of the heart, then suddenly turned inside out and pierced the heart,

"*…me.*"

Her passionate look was directed straight at Banri. Her lips puckered to the shape of a kiss. And then,

"I love Tada-kun. Tada-kun loves me too. Therefore, we have started dating."

With both hands together in the form of a pistol cocked to fire, still in the pose of shooting at Banri dead-center, smiling magnificently, Kouko spoke to Two Dimensions. The defeated Banri covered his heart, and made a show of doubling over. Yes, yes, I've died, I've died again, I've been murdered by Kouko's love. I want to die, any number of times. He truly felt so, with all his heart.

As for Two Dimensions,

"…"

He suddenly grabbed his own bag, shouldered it as if it were a bazooka, and sighted Kouko through a hanging loop,

"I'm going to blow away dat pretty face!"

Not satisfied with only shouting something so ambiguous-seeming,

"Ah, I mean...! You filthy bum! You could do it!? Whatta guy! You beast~~~! Excellent~~~! Hey you, isn't school fun!?"

For some reason, he grinned broadly. Standing, he put Banri in a headlock,

"Thah... hursh...!"

It was starting to tighten up really bad. Two Dimensions was a stereotypical herbivorous fashion geek, raised in Shitamachi. He was also an unexpectedly rough guy. While the groaning Banri swayed more and more,

"Eh? Could you fill me in, the short version? Did you spend the night together? And then this morning as a couple still? That the way it was? Hmm? Was it like that? Better if you answer now..."

Stuttering, "Y, y, y, you're wrong..." while answering quicker than his dying breath,

"Last night we were arrested by the police."

The gracious smile that Kouko showed smashed Two Dimension's vulgar suspicions. That must've entered into Two Dimensions' head, because he released his arm from around the gasping Banri's neck, and he burst into laughter at once.

"A, arrested...! Caught! What were you even saying, Kaga-san!? You making a serious face was interesting, really!"

"Interesting? Me? How so?"

"It's plain as day, isn't it...?"

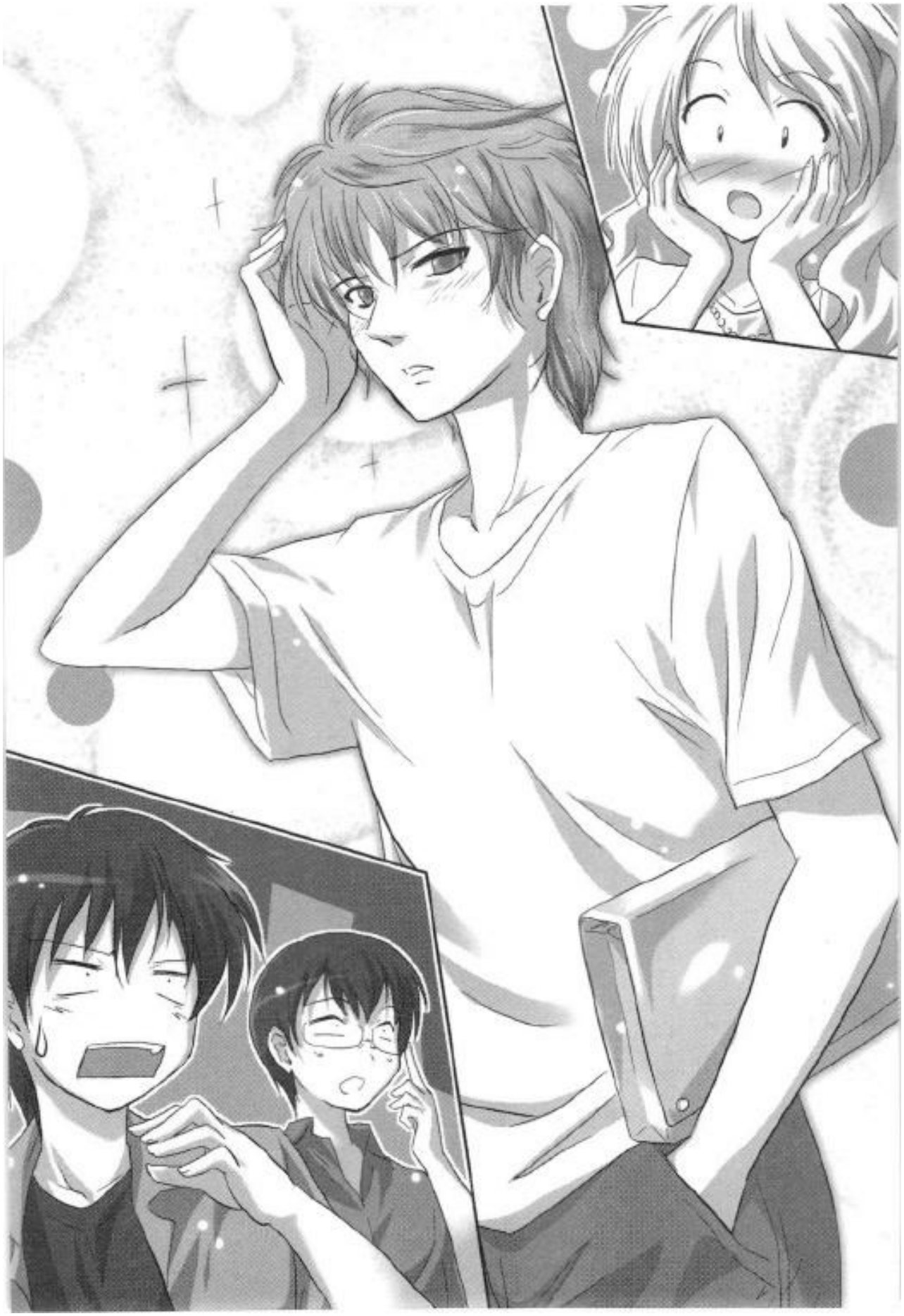
Muttering "Isn't it?" to Banri, who was holding his neck, Kouko nodded.

While Two Dimensions was still bent over double, continuing to laugh like an idiot, sat back down as if he were throwing himself into the chair,

"Now what're we going to do with these people, really! Hey Yana-ssan, did you hear that now!? They're dating! Banri and Kaga-san! Can you help but laugh!?"

"Eehh!?"

With a shout, Banri looked over his shoulder. He had no time to worry, nor to think. Two Dimensions waved beyond him and called, "Yo!" Yanagisawa Mitsuo, aka Yana-ssan, was standing there.



Standing there,

"Huh?"

Eyes wide, he was looking at them. That hair,

"Whaa!? Yana-ssan, you look great!"

Banri called back, that he looked even more handsome. Two Dimensions raised his voice again, "Yana-ssan is super cool!" Kouko was shouting too.

"...Eh? Like, like that?"

He seemed embarrassed at the unexpectedly high praise of his new hairstyle he'd gotten, a foreign-looking, at a glance unruly-seeming, casual, airy perm. With his handsome features, coupled with a moderately muscled, tall figure, he really seemed to be of mixed-race, or something. He was wearing only jeans and a T-shirt, but he wouldn't have looked out of place in a magazine. Whether it was on purpose, or coincidence, the cuff area of his blue-jeans were wrinkled in a particular way. He was so much not imitating anybody, it was cool.

The person in question, as a young man himself, unaccustomed to such things, was rubbing his cheeks as if he were embarrassed, and frowning as if in explanation.

"Well, in fact yesterday I thought, 'Enough with this head of mine. I'll just get it shaved.' But when I went to the barbershop, they told me 'If you're getting it cut anyway, why don't you let my new apprentice cut it for you?' and this sort of perm... I said 'well done!' out of delight, since he cut it so fast I'd wondered if it wasn't a bad job... no, or rather, eh? What? Banri and Kouko...? What's up with them?"

"They're dating! Isn't it an incredible surprise? It shook me up a bit."

Without hesitation, Two Dimensions explained for them. Banri mumbled a little, and glanced quietly over in Kouko's direction. Wh, what shall we do? Do you think we ought to give some sort of explanation to Yana-ssan about us? Such was the meaning of the look he gave, but to Banri's glance Kouko nodded "yes yes yes yes!" repeatedly,

"We really agree! That hair suits you!"

Somehow she kept her voice down. Arching her beautifully drawn eyebrows, she flicked her eyes up and down Mitsuo quickly, then gave him a great big thumbs up. Banri felt exhausted, thinking "That isn't it...," however,

"...No. For a moment, I thought 'Eh!', but I wasn't particularly surprised. To say that I knew isn't an exaggeration."

For Mitsuo to say such a thing lightly was an anti-climax.

"Or rather, I somewhat suspected that sooner or later you would get like that."

Setting his bag on the table with a thud, he put his hand to his hair, apparently unaccustomed yet to its fluffiness, and flashed Banri a grin.

"So don't make a face like that, Banri. Some might think it unpleasant, like you're about to blow up."

That graceful, spendidly handsome, beautiful face. Without thinking about it, Banri raised one finger and started scratching the cheek of his almost adult face.

"...You 'knew'... since when?"

"Yep, it was pretty certain, after you declared so furiously, 'I talked with Kaga-san, and we decided to be friends! She's a beautiful person!' I thought of that just now, though to be fair, that's after the fact."

"Some, something like that happened?"

"Banri's forgetful!", Two Dimensions laughed. Then Kouko came and glued herself tight to Banri's arm,

"Beautiful person?"

Raising her face, a spoiled expression there, she pointed at herself.

"Me, a beautiful person?"

While pointing with both her left hand and her right, she declared "Beautiful Person! Super Beautiful Person!", and Kouko, seeming even happier than before, glued herself to him.

And then, cuddling close to Banri still, she huffed. Her sweet smile disappeared as she looked over in Mitsuo's direction,

"I mean... what's with you, Mitsuo, are you feeling good? Though you always made a bad face when you were about to go out with me..."

She had one eyebrow raised, her smile icy. Resting her chin on her uplifted shoulder, Kouko's face became nasty in her private battle with her childhood friend. Though frankly, Banri didn't dislike that face either.

"Besides, your assumptions are wrong. If you say that Tada-kun and I are going out, then you were absolutely thinking the opposite of us. For the same reason my parents... even though it was like they were aiming at me, they said that Tada-kun's life was all messed up. So, has it even occurred to you to think about why you were told about it? Do you want to hear about it?"

Speaking to Mitsuo, who sat across from her, her whole face a grin, like a demon.

"No! I don't want to hear about it!"

He shook his head from side to side violently, as if he were tearing it off.

"Won't you listen for now? Well, I was destined to be with Tada-kun, from the start."

"No! I don't want to hear about it! Or rather, I'm not worried about Banri. Banri, as far as I can see, has an extraordinary capacity for waiting, and should be able to associate with you."

"Ah, that was a compliment, for now," he turned and said to the flustered looking Banri.

"And besides, as far as I'm concerned, it's a relief. Up until now, she's been a maturing evil spirit, clinging to and harassing me! It felt like that."

A person's woman was being called an evil spirit. But the Kouko in question simply snorted, and didn't seem to take any offense.

"Surprising, isn't it? If that's all you can say, it seems like you really aren't down? Mitsuo seems to be tougher than I ever thought. Though I might seem so too, am I a little worried? Saying, "Mitsuo, is he really OK?" But that day! What *Mitsuo* here, did with regards to that miserable, pretentious, Ultrasonic! That, I cannot forget, you see,

O! M! G! Looking up to the heavens and closing her eyes, Kouko threw her hands in the air. Banri, of course, tugged a little nervously on one of her elbows,

"Ka, Kaga-san, that's a bit much..."

"It's o-kay. Mitsuo's a strong kid. Hey, setting that aside... isn't there always something more important? Don't we each have a different second period? What are we planning to do for lunch?"

"Lu, lunch... well..."

"Our first lunch since we started dating."

If you put it like that, today was perhaps a bit special. But Kouko gave Two Dimensions the thumbs up. In that way, she promised that at lunchtime, together with Two Dimensions and Yana-ssan, they would go buy deflated lunches and eat them on a park bench. She promised that Banri would show them where "there's cheap, delicious lunches." Banri realized that Kouko had just risen in his esteem, seeing as she didn't want to even seem like someone who makes light of the friendship of somebody she'd just gotten over.

"Today I'm eating with the boy's team... sorry."

"Would you like to be tied up? Or not? I'm only asking you this once, so answer me honestly."

"Nooo... not very much..."

"Well then, I'll forgive you. Until which period is it today?"

"Third period..."

"We'll wait in the lobby after third period."

With a sweet smile, her plans made, Kouko stood up lightly with her bag in hand. "See you later!" she said, moving her hands like Her Majesty the Queen, her high heels ringing and her curls bouncing, the well-poised person he so admired left, quickly walking ahead.

He realized it was already past the first period's starting time.

"Ah, we're running late! Let's go! What's that?"

Yana-ssan and Two Dimensions started to look back, but they noticed something unusual.

"Wait for me, Banri! And drag along Yana-ssan!"

Bowled over by those last minute words from Kouko, Mitsuo fell to one knee. It was a tremendous body blow; in the moment he realized it, the pain was curling through his whole body. What's more, in resisting it all Mitsuo was not such a 'strong kid'.

"Sh...", he groaned, unable to stand up. Quickly, Banri and Two Dimensions propped him up from both shoulders, but,

"Oh...ooh, an, smi... what in the world...!?"

To the question in the deathlike voice, the other two had no answer. First of all Banri, his head tilted in puzzlement,

"...Was that 'I' ... 'cannot stand it' ... 'anymore'?"

Continuing, Two Dimensions,

" 'Chat' ... 'manga' ... 'government' ?"

'Ha ha ha ha,' 'stupid,' 'not funny,' all three of them were for now trying to laugh,

"...Haa. Or rather, really, I hurt too much that moment..."

They turned towards their classroom and, as they walked as fast as they could, Mitsuo gave a depressed sounding sigh.

At that moment, of course, it was about the first-years drinking party of the other day. Through the end of the drunken fight with Kouko, sniping at each other as hard as they could, then confessing stupidly to Chinami. Her response, "Eh? Are you an idiot?" surprising even Kouko with its sharpness, defeating him with a single stroke, settling the matter that very night.

Banri and Two Dimensions exchanged a brief glance over Mitsuo's head. That one surely, really, was watching the whole painful scene from the very start. Banri thought. Really, that "O, M, G"... if it were me, I wouldn't be able to go on.

"This is certainly going to be a bit awkward from here on out. I wonder if Yana-ssan's talked with Oka-chan since then? Or even texted?"

Though Two Dimensions was talking, he shook his head,

"Never. Nothing at all. ...I mean, there hasn't been anything from over there. But, over here, though not the way Kouko means it, really becoming 'Mitsuo the strong kid', cool, I mean, I was thinking that normally he would have no choice... But we, we even go to club meetings together. We have a lot of the same classes too. From now on, there won't be anything we don't go to together..."

That's for sure. Banri had to turn his head to avoid a pinch from his friend.

"When next I run into her, if I can try and greet her smoothly? I'll wear a face like 'the other day I was only drunk.' I'll say I was causing trouble, that's all."

"...That's right. You'd best go with that approach. ...It's even smart; making a joke of it might just work."

It had gotten a bit late, perhaps, but the door was still open. They could see students entering, and then coming right back out to the hallway.

Wondering, Banri entered halfway too and saw on the chalkboard, in big letters, "Lecture Cancelled!"

"What the!? Why!?"

Underneath, in small letters, it said the lecturer had taken ill suddenly. Two Dimensions and Mitsuo looked at it too,

"Whoa, that's something! When I finally hurried with my translations!"

"Wow. What a waste getting up... I could've slept in."

All the students, as one, did an about face then and there. It was not at all unpleasant to have first period suddenly cancelled. They could have slept in if they'd known ahead of time, but having come to school, it now occurred to them that they suddenly had time to visit.

"Shall we go back to the cafeteria? I want to ask some questions regarding Banri and Kaga-san."

"There are things that must still be discussed about your future too."

"But we just went over that, and the situation hasn't changed..."

Their faces matching, like comrade bums, they had no choice but to chat tiredly. And about love, of all things.

Some guy he recognized from the same class said, "Got time? How about it?" He was waving a tile around to tempt them, but, not knowing mahjongg, this threesome also took a pass. Walking off down the corridor, Banri for some reason turned to face the guy they'd just passed,

"I mean, shouldn't we ought to learn mahjongg? Though one of the older guys in the Omaken, from staying so long in the mahjongg parlor, didn't even come to lecture. Is it true that if you don't play, you'll get snubbed?"

"Eeh?" Mitsuo frowned as he spoke.

"Isn't 'that' no more than a money exchange? Is it all that difficult to have 'money friends'?"

"Is that so? Actually, I don't know, or rather, I can't hear clearly around those places."

"They're absolutely bad places. Ain't I right, 2D?"

Catching the sudden change in moniker, Banri burst into soft laughter. While even Two Dimensions laughed,

"Well, wouldn't there be the case where it isn't? But that wouldn't be interesting. I mean, the Mitsuo Mangrove, its..."

How ridiculous! Banri was suddenly rolling on the floor with laughter. He laughed uproariously, like a monkey's brother, while he tried to say something sensible of his own.

"...Oh..."

He stopped moving. *Uh oh,* he gulped. No, Banri had no need to gulp, and yet,

"...Oka-chan, she's here..."

Though she was looking this way, it was clear they had seen her petite shadow down the corridor first. Casually turning around towards Mitsuo behind him, Banri intended to point her out to him. He'd said earlier that his heart was prepared for his normal greetings to be ignored.

However,

"---There's no way, of course!"

He spoke quickly, at mach speed.

All that lacked was a sonic boom as with everything he had, Mitsuo escaped from that place. Eh? Neither Banri nor Two Dimensions could follow in running away as obviously as that, rather with the same energy that they'd been escaped from, they turned around to face before them,

"...Good morning."

Oka Chinami, standing stock still by herself, was waving at them.

A cute, childlike figure, a sugary-sweet anime voice.

"And I was just about to say, 'Class got cancelled, eh? I was taking the same one, and wound up with spare time.' Yeah."

Grin. She seemed lonely, in a way he'd never seen since he'd known her, but Banri could see a vague smile on her lips.

* * *

All of a sudden, there had been a change of tour members.

With Yanagisawa Mitsuo OUT, and Oka Chinami IN, there formed a curious trio. Returning to the cafeteria, they sat around a table to kill time. Pouring free all-you-can-drink tea for each of themselves,

"I'm beaten, I'm beaten... I might be beaten."

Chinami sighed, resting her chin in her hands. With both her hands pressing against her white cheeks, her mouth was sharpened to a beak. In the depths of her anxious eyes, a universe of thousands of twinkling stars sparkled. Her puckered lips were the prettiest.

Gazing at Chinami like that, side by side on the other side of the table, spellbound... Banri and Two Dimensions were on the verge of breaking into grins, watching as if enchanted, they sighed with a meaning entirely different from hers.

If Banri were seen by Kouko showing such a face in front of Chinami, I fear it would probably be the end of the road for him. Romeo, death by poison. In any case, Kouko, even at the best of times, loathed Chinami as much as snakes, and in a way, would hate Banri admiring Chinami

from the very bottom of her heart. To say she hated her very existence would not be an exaggeration.

He understood that, and yet,

"Am I defeated~?"

Showing a sickly smile, Banri snorted. Two Dimensions, in almost the same state,

"Yes yes, defeated~... I understand that~"

Nod, nod, they bowed their heads, showing their agreement.

"It's not a laughing matter!"

Chinami sent her pout once more in the direction of the pair of jokers.

Settled into her chair at the cafetería table, Chinami had a compact sort of cuteness. Purity to the point of being slightly scary. For them, it wasn't.

Slender feet and hands on a petite body. Slim shoulders, a slender neck, a straight back. On her pure white skin, surprisingly long, fan-shaped shadows fell from her long eyelashes. Showing through her light complexion, pure lips. The bridge of her nose was narrow and her eye sockets deep.

Looking small and quiet there, in a state that defied description even just sitting down, Chinami plainly had a mysterious appeal. The cafeteria was the deep forest. They were seated on tree stumps. With the flourescent lamps the sunlight filtering down between the huge trees, Banri and Two Dimensions were the animals fawning over her. They had surely been thinking, instinctively, that they wanted to present her with walnuts they'd peeled with their front teeth, or mushrooms they'd made to ripen amongst the litter of dead leaves. And then, they wanted to see her happy face. They might even cast their bodies into the flames, if only they could snuggle close to her stomach.

Nonetheless, as least as far as Banri was concerned, such feelings were on an altogether different dimension from "love" or "caring", but Kouko would probably find them hard to understand.

Cute Chinami cast down her cute eyes,

"That Yana. Getting a perm like that..."

Murmured cutely with a cute voice. Though it would have suited her to add a chirp.

Today as ever, her full black hair spilled down long, her bangs gathered to the sides over her ears, her round forehead fully exposed.

Looking not unlike Saibaba in a loose cotton blouse and too-high-waisted Ali Baba style pants, sandals from Birkenstock and her usual rustic black day-pack, that is to say her by now familiar ambiguous fashion, all unnecessarily emphasizing the fragility of her slender wrists and ankles, Chinami was unusually feminine. Even combing her long hair down and gathering it over one shoulder with her fingers, it seemed like they would break the moment she applied any force.

"...He didn't have to run away like that. Don't you think so? Neither Banri, nor Two Dimensions left."

Looking up at the faces of the pair of two male friends, Chinami tilted her head to the side. She seemed cute to the point of truly overwhelming them.

From Banri's point of view, he wanted to take Mitsuo's side here. It seemed likely that Two Dimensions, with the same feelings, was a bit troubled watching Banri.

But Mitsuo, he was one cute living being. Awkward, pure, with fine, soft hair. The damage to his scalp from the perm was a little worrisome, but he was a pet, five foot eleven in height.

Hesitating, picking his words, Banri spoke.

"Hey, Oka-chan. You, well, are just a fluttery dagger in black..."

Two Dimensions spouted tea from his nose. Chinami's bangs, *swish,* fell in front of her nose.

"On the one hand Yana-ssan, seen like that, is just an innocent young man who doesn't even know where the mushrooms sprout... though on his upper body he has fuzz sprouting here and there..."

"Wh, what are you saying...? What do you mean...?"

"Of course you know the meaning of the flower below?"

Chinami sprang up. Bending over the table, she slapped Banri's hand.

"S, so! Though I told you before! I don't have any such flower blooming below! It's the truth! You'll believe me any time now!"

"It's a joke, it's a joke, in fact, the meaning is figurative. Seriously. Really. ...Yana-ssan doesn't care much, he's in such a pitiful state. Drunken, having made such a forceful confession, well, having done that sort of thing. Of course, don't we guys understand that there's nothing bad in you? But, would it have been possible, in that case, to have let him off a little easier? I mean, to make things like it never happened, to be close to him just as before."

"...I mean, hey..."

Returning to sit in her chair, Chinami turned her petite body over to the custody of her chair's

back.

"To do something like that was my intention, of course. But if he's going to run away like that, I guess ignoring him (or not) isn't possible."

Passing a tissue to Two Dimensions, who was still coughing and unable to say anything, Chinami's dark, clear eyes looked at Banri.

Oh. In an instant he forgot his words, the color of those eyes was so marvelously deep. Bottomless, and surprisingly cool.

"Besides, as for me, that didn't count as 'being confessed to'. Something done while drunken is usually forgotten. And yet, running away like that, when you're no longer 'under the influence', isn't inexcusable. As far as I'm concerned, it's nothing to do with the here and now. Normally, you get hurt."

"...Oh well. So it is. Running away like that, was perhaps a little..."

With that fluffy hair style... though at the time he showed up he looked cool. Despite how cool he was, accepting the matter of himself and Kouko at once. In spite of how cool he was, enduring Kouko's attack right afterwards. Banri remembered having sympathy for him as he dashed away behind his friends' backs.

He understood the guy's feelings.

It was too much to endure, a bitter state to be in, he thought. But if he'd tried a little harder to stick around this place, and if he'd been able to keep looking cool, if he'd done so, chatting with Chinami like before, like this, they could have put things back to normal.

"...Mitsuo wasn't such a strong kid... so much."

Wiping his mouth, finally returning to the conversation, Two Dimensions followed up.

"But, beyond that, Yana-ssan has his good points. Don't you think so? Even though he's such a handsome guy, inside he's just a smelly human being, normally feeling nervous. After all, what we do, he and I, is about the same. We can't help but be ordinary people, it seems like. As it is, his looks are practically there already. But even if he were a completely and perfectly finished guy, I still think he would be rather disagreeable, myself. He's too different from the world, I mean."

That speech having a rather nice feel to it, Chinami agreed a bit, nodding towards Two Dimensions. With Banri's agreeing as well,

"Certainly. That's the way it is. Besides, with respect to Yana-ssan,"

Settling back into his chair, he related it all with a ever more knowing face,

"...!"

He saw... that person.

So surprised he suddenly lost his balance, tipping over into the chair behind him. Bang and clanging, the sound echoed. All at once, the scattered people looked towards him.

"Banri!" There were three people's voices calling his name.

Standing with Two Dimensions and Chinami, there was one more: Linda.

Linda's figure, it was there. She was standing in the entrance to the cafeteria. Her hair, though not very long, was forced into a single knot. She had a day-pack hung from one shoulder. She was wearing a navy blue jersey and a light blue cardigan, tight jeans and her usual Nikes. Her eyes opened wide. Her red... lips...

Banri got up without saying anything, tossed his bag into their scattered baggage and took off running as he was. Leaving Two Dimensions, Chinami, Linda and just about everybody else behind there, without even looking back, he ran out.

Running running, running, eyes forward he jumped into the elevator that had just arrived. He pushed '9' for the top floor to go up for now, and the door closed. Going steadily up in the elevator car, he stood frozen like a pole.

Waah... he closed his eyes. He covered his eyelids with his hot hands. It was like that. Perhaps because he'd seen Mitsuo's mach-speed escape, he'd just done the same thing. ...No, he wouldn't deceive himself with such words. He couldn't even blame his friend.

He'd fled. That was entirely due to his own weakness. Seeing that me, that person--- Linda, what must she have thought? Did she get mad? Was she hurt? Was she despising me? Saying "As I thought, that guy is useless, he's changed," will she turn her back on Tada Banri?

He had even ignored all her texts.

Are you okay? Please contact me. I'm worried! How are you doing? I'm sorry for it all. She sent him words like that, but no matter what, he couldn't answer her.

The ninth floor was professor's and graduate student's offices all lined up. He could see by the light through each office's windows, but there was nobody around. Into the deathly quiet space, Banri stepped forward unsteadily.

But what should he say back to her? What kind of expression should he make, what should he say? How should he face her, what should he say to her, to the now entirely forgotten Linda?

What was Linda thinking of him?

It was scary.

Having known his former self, what Linda thought of his current self before her, in her heart, really and truly, he did not know. ...And though he did not know, from what he could imagine, he was scared.

They hadn't simply run into each other innocently, as in "I'm happy to see you again!" That much even Banri understood. If that were the case, from the beginning, Linda would probably have spoken with him from the start.

That night, Linda had called him "Banri."

"Forgive me, I was scared!" So she had cried out.

He could not forget that voice. He could no longer think of the "gentle, reliable Linda-senpai."

At that moment, Linda was calling the old Tada Banri. It wasn't this self existing now. Calling that guy, and then begging for something. It wasn't himself. Wasn't Linda wishing for that guy to wake up and answer her, for him to return to her and stand before her eyes, that in particular?

---Scared that it seemed entirely so, Banri had fled from that place at once. It isn't you. Go away. Disappear. Being rejected like that was scarier than anything else.

And now, recognizing himself fearing such a thing was scary too. Pretending to be having fun, like everything had been forgotten, promising to date Kouko, who said she loved him, getting together to laugh and mess around with friends; he couldn't live any other way.

Really, he wasn't going to just forget that terror.

However, he was only pretending not to notice. Not looking directly at her, but rather at something else over that way, he simply continued deceiving her. Where acting like that would lead him to in the end, he didn't know. Neither did he know when it would be over. Only that he continued acting incomplete.

So, when suddenly the source of his great fear appeared before him, he didn't know another way to get away than this.

Waah. Head in his hands, he crouched down in that place. As it was, he didn't want to meet her again, even though there was just no way he could do that. To truly leave her behind, and then make things as if they never were, there was just no way. The story might be different if he were to fall down once more from a tall bridge, but he didn't believe in miracles enough to risk himself to that extent, and more than anything else, he didn't think Kouko would permit it. He wondered how far and how many times she would have chased after him on the bicycle, trying to carry him over the bridge on the handlebars. She wouldn't allow such a thing. She would hug him tightly and pull him back.

In the corner of a landing, setting his back to the wall, Banri crumbled weakly. He buried his face in the knees of his bluejeans. He wanted to see Kouko. He wanted to see her so badly, he couldn't stand it.

"...Kaga-san..."

I want to see you right away.

I want you pull me back from this scary world.

I want you to help me.

I want you to tell me in that gentle voice, "You can stay here." I want to hear your voice saying "I love you."

I want to see her.

Chapter 2

2

Tada Banri was checking his timing.

College first period, in the corner of the lobby.

While hiding himself stealthily by a column, he watched the students coming and going, mixing together, looking for the moment to jump out.

If you looked at him closely, he'd seem an ordinary guy, not very strange. And yet, with a ghost right next to him (mine!), sticking with him in the very same pose; if people had the least ability to see spirits, they'd see me, but it seems that such situations only exist in stories.

Banri, his back still stuck to the column, slowly stuck out his face, drawing it back at once. Concealing the pounding in his chest, he wondered if he could make his face more like Tom's in Mission Impossible, but unfortunately he could not. He was Japanese.

Some meters in front of the table, a few of the Omaken upperclassmen were seated. Linda was there too. There, in the club's territory, they were chattering away as always.

At first, Linda wasn't there. So Banri tried to get closer to the table, but noticing that Linda was coming from another direction saying "Good Morning!" and such, he had hidden here in a panic. And that's how it came to be like this.

He couldn't get any closer for now, but to make his retreat from here, getting close to that table was something he had to do, and Banri had become unable to move.

Still unaware of Banri being present in that way, Linda sat on the shallow bench, having fun chatting with the other guys about this and that.

Banri has been acting like this ever since the morning he ran away as soon as he saw Linda's face. He won't go near the places where the second-years are. If he happens to notice anybody that looks like Linda, he runs away instantly. Linda, nevertheless, sends him a text once every day. Did you come to school today? That kind of thing. But without answering, Banri continued to sneak away and hide.

Since the drinking party, he hadn't even shown his face to the Omaken upperclassmen. There were scheduled practices he hadn't gone to, and at present because of that something was going to happen, so of course it could not stay like this indefinitely.

"...Ahh... What to do..."

That was the truth! Looking up at Banri's face talking to himself, I told him. What will you do, Tada Banri?

Making a face like that, so miserably running from place to place. How long do you plan on going on like this!? Be firm! Be earnest!

Live life boldly!

---Of course, my voice doesn't even reach you.

"..."

Banri took a long breath and came out from behind the column. To look at him, he seemed a young soldier lost alone in enemy territory, seen dimly amongst the other students coming and going in the early afternoon.

I took a breath in the same way. Already tired of following along, even in Banri's hide and seek, I craned my neck to look over towards the table. At the table, or rather, at Linda.

Seated lightly with her hand stuffed in her pants pocket still, Linda was raising her voice in laughter at the joke of some guy he didn't know. From the pocket where her hand was still, a cell-phone strap protruded. Holding tightly to the cell-phone in her pocket, she was probably keeping on her wait for a reply from Banri. Linda was that kind of person.

That, Banri did not know.

He didn't know how pretty Linda's long hair was, nor how fast a runner she was, nor her sweet singing voice, nor how she was always wondering whether to get a piercing, nor even her pride at how her abs were about to break into a six-pack. And however gentle or cute she was, she was a splendidly willful person too... Banri knew nothing about Linda.

And so, not knowing how much Linda was worried about Banri, or how much she was restraining her emotions and not saying much in her text messages, even not knowing such things, she probably needed him.

It was intolerable.

To this body that understood Linda, Banri's attitude was unbearable.

If only I could step out, separate myself from Banri and snuggle up to Linda's side. Many a time, it was as if such thoughts were stirred up in me. If only I could hold wrap these hands around Linda's shoulders. If only I could caress her head, say "All's well!" and stick my nose into her hair like a puppy of the same litter. ...And yet, even just being able to sit next to her would be good enough. I want to be by her side.

Banri still hadn't moved. Hiding behind the column, hanging his head, he was troubled, looking as if he were about to cry. And so in the end, I continued in my presence at Banri's side.

Not moving from my, from Banri's side, was simply because of fear. If I were to separate myself from Banri's side, I have a feeling that really would be "the end." That Tada Banri's existence would be completely forgotten was scary. I'm scared that who I am, who I lived with, that all would be lost completely. And I'm scared of disappearing altogether.

For that reason, if I were to stop keeping an eye over Banri, a point of view would disappear from this world. Either way, I disappear. ...Perhaps.

Of course, I'm dead. I've known that. That's long over. I certainly understand that. Though I comprehended that, though I had already given up, yet still, to choose to step in out another direction from his own body was terrifying. There was an instinctive, primordial fear there, one he could not understand himself.

Unable to overcome that fear, the cowardly dead me had no choice but to continue hiding with Banri. ...For such as I, perhaps, may not have the right to say that I "cling tightly" to Banri.

At the Omaken table, just then, Kaga Kouko came into sight. Banri noticed, and his body went stiff.

Linda waved to her, calling "Ko-ko-chan," and made her sit next to her.

"Eh? Err, Tada-kun didn't come? But he said a little bit ago, 'I'll see you at the upperclassman's place.'"

"No, he hasn't come."

"Is that so? That's odd. I'll try calling him."

Kaga Kouko pulled out her cell-phone, with an elegant movement pulling back her hair to expose her ear.

Ma ma ma ma --- From Banri's back pocket started vibrating and jauntily playing a forgotten ringtone, at quite a volume.

Kaga Kouko lifted her surprised face, and looked over to the column where Banri and I were hiding.

Panicked, Banri tried to stop the melody, dropping the cell-phone in his impatience. Failing to pick it up, a private ring tone that, after saying only a few days ago "Gaga's good," Kouko had set in Banri's cell-phone, continued to play.

Po po po.

Pressing the button with his thumb, the melody finally stopped.

Holding his breath, Banri, his body ramrod straight, tried to become one with the pillar.

"..."

Kaga Kouko's white face. Her wide eyes. Forlornly looking into space, she closed her cell-phone as it was and put it in her bag.

"It didn't connect?"

At Linda's query, she answered "no" with a pretty smile.

"Sort of. It went to the answering machine."

I watched.

Everybody, each and every one--- had a poker face.

* * *

The moment he opened the door,

"It isn't very tidy, though."

Telling himself that he musn't show his bit of nervousness, Banri, casual to the max, in an ordinary way, entered into the next room. Kouko followed behind him.

"Pardon the intrusion. Are you locking the door?"

"Ah, as it was... ah, sorry, of course it's locked."

Ye-s. *Click.* The dull sound of a lock setting. The sudden feeling of being behind closed doors. Banri, awkwardly stepped forward, both right hand and right foot together.

"It's been since that day, hasn't it? I've come to Tada-kun's place."

Kouko took off her high-heeled sandals with a smile, "err", looking around the narrow entryway.

"Wh, what's up...?"

"Do you happen to have slippers? Because I'm wearing sandals, I didn't wear stockings, so I'm barefoot."

Drat. That's right. Slippers.

Slapping himself once on the forehead, Banri thought regretfully. He'd thought his preparations were perfect, but he'd had a blind spot.

It would have been a good thing if back when he'd just arrived in the capital, in the short while his mother was there for him, he'd accepted slippers from her. He'd said, "I don't wear them, and even if I had space they're a bother" and gave them back to her. Though his mother Mieko

had told him, "If friends come over, what will they wear?" Banri had replied flatly, "Friends refined enough to wear slippers don't come over. Humans like those who come up to my room, all of them are guys that would probably pad around casually in their bare, sweaty feet." There's no use crying over spilt milk. Such were his thoughts.

"I have no excuse... Now, in this room, there is nothing like unto slippers..."

Somehow, he'd even done it a little literary in style.

"Oh. What can I do? Still, they're not done up, and going barefoot might be a little embarrassing..."

"I, I would never mind, though... oh yeah, instead..."

Banri dashed into his room, selected the nearest new socks from an unlabeled, semi-transparent box there, grabbed a pair,

"If it's okay with you, here's this..."

Like something offered to the gods, he handed them over to Kouko. Even with such a problem, Kouko received them, looking happy, her lovely face smiling broadly.

"Thank you. This is my second time borrowing your socks, you know."

"Is... that so?"

"Yes it is! Have you forgotten?"

Was she saying he'd forgotten the past? Was she saying he already had his hands full with the present?

There there, for now for now, come in come in, Banri invited Kouko to enter. He pleaded that his room wouldn't smell, nor his feet. That he wouldn't have a stomach-ache. While praying to the heavens for this and that, on his face was a smile. With all his might, right now, Banri wanted to bring about the most casual atmosphere possible.

Because, she suddenly said it. "Today, would it be all right if we go to your place?" or something like that. "Why not just take it easy, the two of us?"

Told something like that, suddenly, at the end of first period, Banri frankly returned immediately to his place.

Not saying anything to anybody, not giving a clue to Mitsuo nor even to Two Dimensions, ditching class, he dashed home temporarily, and desperately cleaned his room of the smells that go with unkempt males.

He took all the accumulated garbage bags down to the first floor garbage station (a most wonderful thing in this world, those 24-hour garbage stations), cleaned things, stuffed the dirty laundry for now all out of sight in the clothes washer, and stored all the not quite dry clothing and underwear into boxes in the closet and under the bed. The things he didn't want Kouko looking at, but were too valuable or precious to throw away, he stuffed into a box that had held stuff sent from home. A few "sexy things," which if they were noticed wouldn't be too worrisome, he dared to place in places easy to understand. This way, saying "I don't have anything hidden, do I? Men are all like this. I am entirely open." he would bring about the mood.

And then, the demon spray of Fabreze. The fury of Toilet Quickle. The thunder of Quickle Wiper.

And then--- good. To the bed.

He didn't have such plans, but just in case, the bed.

To make it, or not to make it.

A dirty towel spread out on the pillow, he'd picked it off and tossed it out. The sheets, safe. Miraculously safe. Since he'd moved into this room, he frankly hadn't cleaned it even once, and yet by chance the day before yesterday, he'd felt like taking care of his laundry... no, just kidding. Promising himself to do it, he did his laundry. Having the towel-blanket to be washed also, he did his laundry.

Kouko was probably going to come into his room at some point, and he was worried that if for some reason or other she were to ask if she could use the bed. So she wouldn't think at that moment "Wow, this guy's bed's filthy! There's no way I'd sleep here!" he straightened it up ahead of time.

And then, if he wrapped each pillow up in towel-blankets, then look here, this isn't a bed, is it? It's a sofa, right? So let's sit down! Here, side by side. Right? Right!?

...Saying such things, looking forward to things going well, what shopping was needed, he did.

At the convenience store, one of the Muji stores. For the first time in his life, he was buying things in silver packages. Because he was an idiot, he was seriously worrying where to put all fifteen of them, because he was an idiot, he tried to arrange them here and there. And then, because he was an idiot, in the end, not knowing what he should do, he hid four apiece in his three closets, and against his will, he stuffed one in his wallet. He believed that like this, casually, would be just right... eh... no, wait...!?

Was it strange...?

Was he going to say in that moment, "Hold on!" and walk cheerfully, his seedy butt exposed, to the closet, to his wallet or wherever? Was he going to go to get it, like an idiot, even in such

places as those? Eh...? What sort of face was he making? Did he say, "Wait a moment~"? ...No way, no way! No way something like that! More like this... that's right, if he put the wallet closer to the bed, within casual reach...

"Hey, Tada-ku~n"

"What!?"

Without realizing it, with a look akin to horrible domestic violence, he'd whirled on her.

In the kitchen, Kouko had stopped moving as if in shock. Her standing figure somehow seemed like Mickey Mouse, owing to the white socks on her feet.

"Wow, sorry... what, what? What, what happened?"

"Th, though I thought I heard you ask if I could make some coffee..."

"Oh, yes yes! Or rather, because I do things like that, you just sit down! Take it easy, OK?"

By the sink, already set out, he had a pair of clean cups and some instant coffee sent from home. When he'd last gone back home, he'd arranged little things like this.

In order to finish up with them, Banri had, pretending innocence, returned a second time during the middle of third period. Eh? Me? Wasn't I there the whole time? You left the lecture. I wasn't there? I must've been in the bathroom! Acting like that.

The reason for him sneaking around like that was a matter of male sensitivities.

Anyway, saying "I desperately need to clean my room," he didn't want the truth to be known. Not by Kouko, not by anybody. He didn't want to be misunderstood. Whether he was full of anticipation of something erotic, or was simply desperate, if he seemed like that, forgive him. ...Of course, he wasn't going to speak of what wasn't happening. What wasn't happening, was of course nothing. He wished that someday such things would happen. Even if nothing happened, so that he wouldn't worry, he prepared. But, that that case was even thought of was wholly unexpected.

The cleaning of the apartment, for the first time, thoroughly, was so Kouko would get a good impression of it. Because he didn't want her to think it dirty. Because even if it was snug, he wanted her to enjoy her time there.

He didn't want to be captured by such pure devotion, by her saying such things as "I want to do it now! Desperately! Tada Banri!"

...He didn't, really.

And so, leaving casually after fourth period, he'd met up with Kouko. Shaken together by the

train, they returned once more to this room.

Already, the orange light from the setting sun shone through the two windows to the northwest, lighting the floor. Pouring mineral water into the T-Fal electric kettle, he flipped the switch. He would normally use tap water, of course.

"Well then, it seems I've casually accepted your offer."

"Just like that!"

Kouko grinning with socks on and facing towards the bed disguised as a sofa--- made him think, and suddenly change direction. To the corner of the kitchen.

Looking at it, Banri jumped up, startled. He swallowed a yelp from having overlooked something dangerous.

"...mpf..."

Calm down. He calmed himself down. Grabbing the kitchen counter with his trembling hand, he propped up his body.

He'd realized, now, that he'd made a terrible mistake.

On top of a stool in the corner of the kitchen, there were some hazardous materials left sitting in a cardboard box.

He should have tried to hide it on top of the cupboard, ...oh yeah. At the time he was trying to hide it, he'd gotten a text, distracting him and making him forget completely.

Kouko, without noticing the intense aura Banri was emitting, grabbed hold of the box, set it at her feet with a grunt, and sat quietly on the stool. ...It's okay. There's nothing to be worried about. Nothing's happened. He hadn't been exposed.

"Oh, pardon me for acting out of turn. The box, is it OK if I put it here?"

"...Y, yes..."

"What's in there? It seemed rather heavy though..."

"...Veg... vegetables... and things..."

"From Shizuoka? Oh, maybe, something made back at your home?"

"...Mph, mmphh..."

"Eh? What?"

Without being aware of Banri's heart begging her "Stop it... to cut it out... to stop pretending... even physically... even subjectively...," Kouko smiled, in good spirits. In her current mood, as awkward as she was, she might easily say things like "Can I look? Oh!"

For the time being, there was no way he could keep her away from this kind of hazardous materials.

Quickly pouring the coffee, he set it on the low table in the center of the room. And then, saying "Let's sit over here!", he suggested the cushions on the floor. Little by little, biding his time, he didn't suppose it was time yet to invite her "Don't your feet hurt? Won't you sit on the 'sofa'?" but the time would come. There was no use in hurrying now.

Banri quietly dropped the dark brown powder into the cups, waiting for the water in the pot to boil.

"You've really fixed up this room, haven't you?"

Looking over the small room from the stool, Kouko spoke as if in admiration.

"What's more, somehow it smells nice..."

Here and there in all the disorder of the room, he'd set out some powerful air freshener, working even better than Black Rose.

For now, Banri felt relieved.

He didn't think this cramped, one-room apartment was a suitable place for a perfect woman to live in, but it didn't seem unpleasant to stay here.

So, Kouko was perfect. Today she was perfect too. The lines of her body precisely outlined, the soft material of her one piece dress a pink pattern tending towards red. However it was constructed, it was made to resemble a traditional kimono in the chest area, and showed off her cleavage quite deeply. When he saw her in the morning, it had caught his gaze before he knew it, and to hide the fact he'd said "Th, those clothes really suit you!", at which Kouko had said with a smile, "It's a Fürstenberg!" set one hand on her hip and struck a poze as of a standing model, showing off for him. He had no idea what it was, but anyway, Banri felt he really liked it. He loved it, that *Fasutenbaagu*. It was a really good thing.

Wound through her long, dark brown hair she wore a white katyusha. On her wrist was set a rather large bracelet... not a bangle. Her bag, too, was white. Her entire body wearing a summer fragrance, Kouko seemed to sparkle.

She was like that now, too. She was radiant, glowing as a beautiful woman.

"Co... coffee's ready!"

Unintentionally, his voice had turned into something upside down.

Kouko, still seated on the stool, said "Wow, thanks" and reached out her hand. "No, not so", said Banri, withholding the cup.

"Do-don't you want to sit over there!?"

Jerking his chin over towards the low table,

"I'm fine here. Somehow it feels really comfortable, it suits me! This stool."

"Really...!?"

Banri, smiling, kept a poker face. Told like that, he couldn't refuse, and handed the cup over to her. He gotten to where he'd wanted to throw it away! This stool. While he was practically trembling, for the moment he sat himself at the table as he had intended. This wasn't working out very well.

Realizing that the sound of his long sigh echoed strangely, he grabbed the television remote in a panic. They were running the evening news, and while Kouko swung her feet,

"Wouldn't it have been better if you'd bought some munchies?"

She was talking as if she were completely relaxed.

"Mu... munchies...!?"

"One of those limited time, look, what was it you said? You said it when you left."

"Like potato chips!?"

"Yes yes! That, that kind of thing..."

"Like chile flavor!?"

"That was it! Wow, incredible! How is it you always know what I'm thinking!?"

That's not true! It's because I told you what I saw when I went shopping at the convenience store not long ago! And because while I was at it, I saw a bunch of new products that had been piled up there!

"...Hahaha! How is it that... thinking about one's beloved, of course you'd understand... how is it..."

"Enough of that! Well well, I don't know you either, do I? Yes, that's it! It got it! Among those vegetables, is there any spinach!? How about it, does that hit the spot!?"

---He was dizzy.

I beg of you. Please don't open it up and check it. Right now, there are some truly incredible things stuffed in there. I beg of you. Great god. Great Lady Kaga Kouko.

While on the verge of passing out, unable to speak, Banri, for the time being, drank down the hot coffee in gulps. How was he going to separate that box of hazardous materials from Kouko's curiosity for puzzles?

He could use a well-known pattern, in which he'd say something like "Ouch!" and spill some coffee. When he did so, Kouko would say something like "Are you all right!?" rush over, and with a dish-cloth wipe his chest dry--- and so on. How about that, he wondered. Things would process naturally from there.

Should he try spitting out a mouthful of coffee, and then pretending to be burnt, exaggerating it, tricking her just a little jumping around like a soccer player trying to simulate aiming a free-kick?

"Hey, Tada-kun. Setting aside the spinach, are you listening to me? We had a few things to talk about today."

It might be worth giving it a try. Banri held some coffee in his mouth. And then, ...one, two, "Was there something between you and Linda-senpai?"

"...Ptooey!"

He spit out with all his might.

Coughing violently from coffee stuck in his windpipe, after that he didn't have any voice. Finally Kouko, according to his plan, came rushing over with a dishcloth in one hand and saying "Are you OK?"

"Cough cough cough! ...Urk!"

Of all things to have happen, looking like he was about to throw up, falling to his knees, he turned his back on her cleavage.

"Tada-kun, should I thump your back!? Is there water!?"

"...I'll... I'll be OK..."

Gulping down the nausea that was building to the rhythm of his coughing, Banri took another step, opening up the distance between him and Kouko.

He wondered if there was such cold water.

Why now?

Why was such a topic brought up here?

She simply hadn't forgotten, of course. He always thought that he couldn't just leave the matter of Linda as it was. Ignoring her messages and running here and there, there was simply no way she could like the self that was pretending not to see the senpai that saved his life, that was truly kind and gentle.

He was simply... feeling out of sorts. Being out of it in various ways, he lost control. That was it. Just himself, getting along playfully with a woman, chattering her up, "How goes your cleaning?" "How go those hazardous materials?" There was no way to have fun like this. It was no way to be happy.

"...Ha, a..."

Coughing violently again, Banri covered his mouth firmly.

There, it was done. Over with. Just like that, it seemed.

It was time to look away from inconvenient things and pretend not to notice, enjoying life. Period.

There was no way to escape the reality placed, bam, in front of you. Jumping out, running away even, such was only a temporary flight.

Did something happen between you and Linda-senpai? ---Do you and Linda-senpai have a past?

Before his accident, he and Linda seemed to have gotten that close together, having fun. And then his memories were gone, and without even knowing, they didn't see each other again. Linda, as if she didn't know anything at all, had built up a new relationship with him, and then it failed.

Banri crushed it. My past self must've been pitiful, was, probably, and blamed him.

Linda seemed about to explain, but without so much as listening he had run away.

He was running away the same way, even now. He decided there was some reason for Linda's behavior, some logical reason for it, and that it could be understood, later.

Later, because he did not know what kind of face he ought to show if he ran into Linda.

Feeling he wanted to disappear while standing in front of Linda hurt.

He felt that as far as Linda was concerned, his current self must be something painful. She's probably telling herself that she had to deal with reality. She probably wants the real Banri to return to her. She must want his currently existing self to disappear.

The truth is, nobody should ever be in this position, you cannot even stay human. Nobody knows this better than I.

But, having virtually become like this, I do like this and live. That being denied him, well then, he thought over and over, what should I do? A sadness that he could let go of continued to ooze out from that place, always flowing.

"...Tada-kun, hey, are you really all right? Though you've hidden something..."

However, there were fingertips touching softly that back.

Gentle and warm, those white hands were worried about Banri.

Raising her face, Kouko sat down at Banri's side, her eyes blinking as if in worry.

He thought, wondering that already he could not live without the miracle of her, of Kaga Kouko, staying with and loving such a one as himself.

"Y, yes. I'm OK. Or rather..."

Finally, taking an honest breath,

"Why were you suddenly talking about Linda-senpai...?"

"About that, you see, err..."

He tried to look up at Kouko's face directly. While her large eyes blinked in surprise, Kouko's lips thinned as if she were dodging the question,

"...A woman's, intuition? Sort of?"

Hehe, she shrugged her shoulders.

The matter of his past with Linda, and then the time he happened to spend with Linda recently, what would happen if he told Kouko about it all? He considered it, but stopped at once.

He didn't want to set such "difficulties" between himself and her. To the relationship they had only just joined, he didn't want to impose too much of a burden. For them as a couple, he didn't want to leave even one more item looking even a little bit like work. Even in the best of times, he himself was a landmine. Having something dangerous like loss of memory, he was a man not to be relied upon.

For the perfect Kouko, a perfect happiness was called for. For her, the right thing was a spotless, perfect love, all wrapped up neatly.

"...Did you come all the way to my place, specifically to talk about such things?"

"Err, well..."

To the girl he absolutely couldn't lose, Banri, with all the power in his hands,

"What are you saying? I have nothing at all with Linda-senpai. I like her, naturally. For her, I want to behave as an underclassman."

She grinned back. Nothing more, nothing bad had happened at all, with such a perfectly blank face.

Stiffening towards Kouko in a slightly awkward kneeling position, Banri said "But Kaga-san must be like that too", and broke out in laughter once more. Yes, she nodded meekly.

"Well then, that's over with. Where were we? Munchies? Shall we go buy some? Me, I've somehow gotten hungry. But it's still early for dinner. Or how about if we go get something light at a shop near here? Err, there's a cake shop, an eat-in bread shop, a Vietnamese-like noodle shop, and though we don't have a Starbucks, we do have a Doutor! Our coffee's gotten cold."

As if encouraging himself, Banri said "Let's go for it!" and stood up, full of energy. Wanting to escape for a bit from the mood, he quickly stuffed his cell-phone in his pocket. The housekeys too.

"...That right, isn't it? Well, why don't we take a look at the cake shops for a bit?"

Kouko stood up too, taking her bag from where she'd hung it on a stool.

He had about enough money in his wallet to get into the coffee shop, without even having to go to the bank. About 3,000 yen, if he wasn't mistaken... there wasn't anything in particular he had to buy right now... while he was remembering this in his head, he was tapping out a rhythm with his wallet in his hand.

Something fell, *plink*, to the floor.

Before Banri could notice or even bend over to look, Kouko got there first.

What's this? Crouching down and reaching out,

"Just now something fellll~~~!"

Raising an awful shout, she fumbled it two or three times and let it fall.

"Wh, what!? What's wrong!?"

What the heck is it? He went to pick it up. Silvery, the little package was reminding him of something... and then, recognizing it from what he had just purchased at the Muji store,

"No way~~~~~~!"

Banri shouted too.

He wondered if secret intentions had ever been exposed so openly as this. His mind blank, his face bright red, he kicked the thing under the bed at the speed of light,

"...Did you see!?"

Looking back, he covered his face with his hand. Yep, yep, Kouko nodded.

"Have you seen it!?"

I saw I saw I saw, I saw I saw I saw I saw, she answered, mouthing the words.

"...Wh... What did you think!?"

What are you asking, in her face like a straight man chewing out an air-head? Whatever she thinks or does, wasn't she going to step back from you?

And yet Kouko,

"Ufu... ufufufufufu...!"

Her body wrapped in a one-piece dress, as soft and supple as a cat, she suddenly started laughing. Her face was bright red, about the same as Banri's. Before long, she raised her chin high, one hand on her hip.

"Fufufufu! Fuhahaha! Aahahahahaha!"

...She looked like an evil queen who had conquered the whole world.

Acting the seductress, she laughed as if she were trying to manipulate him, brushing her long hair up before Banri's eyes,

"It is! Hey! ...So it is! It's so, isn't it!? ...Isn't it!?"

Still in the pose of laughing loudly, and yet she was a little awkward in her movements. Half of her was the evil queen. The other half, C-3PO.

"Because we're dating, those... of course, such things happen! I understand! But hey, well, just look..."

Still holding her bag, she was backing off. Slowly but steadily. The upper half of her body not moving, the movement only in her feet.

"...I think something like that, hey, ‘naturally'. If such a thing were to happen as a natural

progression, it would be fantastic... I, don't understand very well though, but if such a thing were to happen like that, I don't understand very well though! It'd be beautiful! But! Still! Anyway! Naturally!"

Before Kouko, who was talking round and round, the veins of her forehead livid, could he do anything other than nod? Banri nodded yes at every single word she said.

"...In Paris!"

He almost fell over.

He thought it would be rather incredible if they were to progress "in due time" and arrive at long last in Paris. At the least, Banri could not "in due time" go to Paris. First of all, he would have to start "in due time" getting himself to the government offices, and "in due time" obtaining for himself a passport.

Then, though Kouko had drawn back, she suddenly raised her eyebrows in a sad expression and slid over, drawing closer to him,

"...It's a dream, something I see. When it comes time to do such things with a guy for the first time, then it has to be Paris. The city of lovers, Paris. To see the Eiffel Tower from a petit hotel... with somebody you love from the heart... It's destiny, one night."

"All, all in due time...?"

"All in due time."

As if she were teasing him, she stared at him with moist eyes, and then suddenly she was clinging to him. She wrapped her smooth arms about his neck and pressing against his lips with uplifted fingers,

"Oh...! Hold, on... Kaga...san!"

What do you mean by "Shh"? Does our conversation carry? Her softly swelling chest pressed up against him perfectly, in a manner of speaking.

As if she were trying to look into Banri's left eye and right, Kouko's beautiful eyes swayed back and forth.

"...I don't want to dishonor our fate by doing things half way. I want to be the perfect lover. As far as I'm concerned, it's something important. ...Very much. Very, very, very much..."

She was sticking to him like a kiss. Just not on the lips. Aiming for the border between chin and neck, her lips pressing up against him were meltingly soft.

"Aaaa..."

It was giving him goosebumps. An excited shiver ran from the nape of his neck to his brain.

With the sound of a kiss again, Kouko's warm lips separated.

From less than one centimeter, point blank range,

"...Shall we go for cake?"

Kouko's lips spoke. There was just no way he could resist that sugary, sexy, husky voice.

"...Yes..."

Like a puppet, putting his feet into motion, Banri turned towards the entryway. Mechanically, he put on his shoes. He waited for Kouko to take off her socks, then went outside and inserted his key in the lock. He turned around.

"...I... might have died...?"

Really, he muttered while they walked together down the outside corridor. Pushing the elevator button, Kouko turned back to Banri happily.

"If we were in Paris, you'd've died. Shell-shocked."

La, Perla... Those strangely unpleasant sounding words that Banri didn't understand, their r's rolled, he thought it was something she really loved. It was probably something awfully good.

"How could we go there, Paris...?"

"If we buy airplane tickets we can go."

"I want to buy them, I want to buy them soon...!"

"I'm looking forward to the Eiffel Tower."

"Eiffel~.... My Eiffel...!" y Entering into the elevator, the moment he touched the "Close" button,

"Wait wait!"

The figure that came running from some room on the same floor was small, but she jumped through the door opening. She'd been startled all of a sudden, and from her lips a cigarette was dangling. If you looked carefully, it was not lit, but in her hand she held a lighter, and seeming irritated, she subjected the "close" button to a barrage of pushes.

Rather quiet, she automatically traded glances with Kouko.

Seeing his neighbor for the first time, she seemed to him rather dangerous.

At a glance, she was wearing worn-out black jersey pants, and a loose black T-shirt. From the beach sandals she was wearing, her black-painted toenails could be seen. Her fingernails were too. On her middle finger was a huge skull ring. Her skin was too pale. Her body was too skinny, like a middle-schooler. Barely realizing that she was a grown woman, he saw through a gap in her sleep-mussed deep black short-bob haircut that her face was surprisingly pretty and well arranged. Looking like a child without makeup, she seemed pale and plainly unhealthy.

The three of them awkward in the closed room, they slowly descended to the first floor.

"...What? You two."

Banri was surprised to be spoken to out of nowhere. He wondered if she was asking what he was looking at.

"Hah. You're dating, of course. Hmph."

Being softly mocked bewildered him yet more. Not knowing what else to do, he looked down at the floor. Kouko looked uncomfortable too, hiding behind Banri's shoulder and looking up at the corners of the ceiling.

"Are you ignoring me?"

Arriving at the first floor, that person left in what appeared to be a bad mood. As soon as she got outside the entrance, she lit her cigarette and puffed with all her might as she walked off.

"...What was that? The person just now."

"I wonder what. She felt a bit scary, don't you think?"

Banri and Kouko turned and walked away in the opposite direction as the scary neighbor, for now, taking aim for the shops.

* * *

Like that, slithering away.

He couldn't help but to sneak around, continuing to run away from Linda and from the Omaken table, and in the end he managed it a whole week.

During that time, he went with Kouko on a date to Ueno Park and they met every day at school. Her credit cards taken away still, Kouko was cut off from her addiction to Starbucks, and seemed uncomfortable, but simply dating as fellow students and walking hand in hand was

plenty of fun, and as far as Banri was concerned, he didn't think it too much of a problem.

As the time he spent with Kouko increased, his time with guys decreased. It was a bit unfair to Mitsuo and Two Dimensions, and for a few days they were even a bit shocked.

And then, June in Tokyo.

And the start of the rainy season.

According to what Kouko said, "It's the season for roses!" and here and there in the area around Banri's apartment brightly colored rose blossoms bloomed in profusion, giving off a sweet scent.

The temperature suddenly went over 85 degrees, and then the next day it fell back 25 degrees. As if trying to accustom the locals to the red hot inferno of summer, the ordeal neared, soaring up and down. Banri wondered if it wasn't the warmup run for the next season.

It alternately cleared up, clouded over, got hot and cooled off. Unable to decide what clothes to wear, he couldn't wear the New Balance shoes Linda had given him.

Banri had secretly stole a glance or two at Linda's form. It seemed to Banri that her situation had not changed, and that she was spending the normal days of a second-year college student. Only that the texts stopped coming. He was unable to meet the faces of the senior Omaken members, but the date they'd previously set for rehearsal was nearing.

Going to the rehearsal would be awkward. But for the only two freshmen to be absent would be awkward too. If Banri skipped, Kouko would probably have questions too.

He couldn't keep on like this. Banri thought he was treating them badly--- Linda, and everybody else.

But as he kept on running away, each day, each hour, each minute, each second even, the weight and awkwardness of his crimes piled up on top of him, and Banri's feet slowed down more and more.

As time passed, the question of "What should I do?" in bitter regret was changing to "What should he have done?"

Even if he could do any of it over again from any point, he could hardly have wound up procrastinating worse. But while he was unable to do such things, more and more time passed.

Time spent with Kouko, that fun, sweet, rose-colored and completely intoxicating time, Banri wanted it all, greedily, for himself. Setting aside pain and bitterness, just spending more and more time going out to eat, he was coming to life. Eating to get time together, he found himself burdened more and more with increasing weight, and he was sure that in the near future he would get to where it couldn't be undone. To Banri, the weight hadn't gotten so bad as a backpack.

Alone like that, still paralyzed, before long,

"Tada-kun?"

---Time must have been standing still.

"Isn't your cell-phone ringing?"

"...What? Oh yeah, it is. I mean, I don't know this number."

Second period over, he'd met up with Kouko before the back door of the big lecture hall.

Pulling his cell-phone out of his back pocket, Banri looked at it in puzzlement. The incoming call was an cell-phone number he didn't know.

"Better not answer it. Sounds suspicious."

Her figure in a vividly orange one piece dress, Kouko raised her prettily drawn eyebrows and shook her head side to side. Today, her white forehead was exposed by braiding her long hair and gathering it up, acting in place of her absent hairband, and in her ears were diamond earrings sparkling brightly.

"Hey, let's go. What do you want to do for lunch today? The cafeteria, of course? As for me, I'm always undecided between specials A and B,"

"Oh! Wait a second. It went to voice-mail."

Talking like a spoiled kid, Kouko said "Let's go! Our favorite corner seats will get taken~," and while she tugged Banri's arm to follow her, the message left by the caller on the answering machine started to play.

He tried to listen, and suddenly he gasped.

A woman saying she worked for the company managing the apartments where Banri lived was saying something like "There has been some accidental flooding on the veranda of the apartment next to yours, and we would like to make sure nothing got inside your place."

"Oh man, are you kidding...!? That's horrible...!"

"What's wrong?"

"They said there was a water leak next door, and my room might be flooded! Wow. Excuse me, but I've got to go home right away!"

"Eh!? You're kidding! Shall we go together!?"

"No no, don't you have third period? Go to the lecture! I'll send you a text later!"

The television, the computer, the wires connecting them... while thinking of the things he didn't want to see wet, Banri waved to Kouko and dashed off. Running to the lobby, slipping through the glass entrance door, he went out under the warm mid-day skies.

He wondered how to get ahold of the insurance company if there was damage. Or rather, he might have been told long ago. He was afraid his parents would ask him "Weren't you listening?" if he called them. He would make his parents worry, calling with such problems again. But this wasn't big enough a problem for that.

He ran to the station, hopped on the train, and worried anxiously til they got to the station nearest his place. Arriving at the platform, he flew out the ticket gate and into the neighborhood, running for the street entrance to his apartment building.

He took the elevator, as unchanging as ever, to the fourth floor, and grabbing his house key as he went out,

"...Eh!? What's going on!?"

"He came, he came. He really came."

The person standing in the narrow outer corridor like a roadblock was completely black.

Jet black hair in a short bob, parted in the middle hanging down in the front, heavy makeup. A studded choker in punker style. In slim black denims and a worn-out tank-top with a skull design, she wore thick rubber-soled boots. So skinny as to rattle like a skeleton, carrying a second-hand guitar case with stickers on it, that figure with the foreign cigarette stuck to her lips... what was the name of the character in that certain shoujo manga?

"You're NANA-senpai... aren't you!?"

---Cosplay, it looked like that was all it was. That, and yet.

"You. You ignored me altogether the other day, didn't you? Even though you've stood on the very same stage with me."

"Eh!? The, the other day... what're you talking about!?"

NANA-senpai squinted sharply, looking presumptuously at Banri's face. So, he had met this person in the spring, a third-year student from the same college. Leading the odd band with the two chainsaw guys and the drummer, while performing that noisy, destructive 'poetry reading', knocking Banri and Kouko from the stage with that guitar, with all her might, she was one very dangerous upperclassman.

Her style was too extreme not to be noticed on campus, so he suspected she might have been

unsociable of late.

NANA-senpai raised her extremely thin eyebrows with a "Hmm?" and plucked the unlit cigarette from her mouth with a skull-ringed finger.

"You don't recognize me? We were on the elevator together."

"The elevator...?"

In other words, some days ago, the time Kouko came over, the person who had said "you're ignoring me" over her shoulder was this NANA-senpai? But in that case...

"But isn't there something wrong about your height!?"

Without a word, NANA-senpai pointed at her boot soles, which were at least 4 inches high.

"I mean, isn't your face completely different!?"

"Makeup."

She said that sharply, with a cold look, as if she were disgusted or amazed at him.

"Well, even though we've been living on the same floor, we never noticed. But, if I hadn't noticed, would I have been able to trick you into coming back with such a phone call? That stuff just now about a leak, that was from me. 'Next door' is my place."

"Eh, eh, eh...!? Neighbor!? You're my neighbor!?"

"You seem to be easily deceived. You ought to be more careful."

"Even though I went around to say hi to everybody when I moved in, weren't you the one who didn't want to come out!?"

"Why would I come out for something like that?"

"I even said we'd brought some evening snacks: Unagi-pai! With my mother! Even though I rang the doorbell!"

"Shut up."

"So hard, just what you might expect of somebody from Tokyo!"

"I'm from Saitama."

While listlessly muttering "Warabi", NANA-senpai started walking down the corridor as if guiding Banri. As he was following after her without complaint, as meek as a servant boy, Banri shouted again.

"So why would you do such a thing...!?"

She opened the door to her own place, next door to Banri's, and sticking her face inside,

"Now. Didn't I tell you he really does live next door?"

She was talking to somebody. And then the face that suddenly and awkwardly came out,

"..."

His breath stopped.

Linda. The person Banri was avoiding, the person in question. As if saying, "I give up," her hair all askew, Linda was also at a loss for words.

Like that for several long seconds, they stared at each other in silent stillness.

"It... it's not what it seems..."

For her part, Linda's voice squeezed out, seemingly painful.

"This, NANA-senpai arbitrarily, practically forced... me, really, I had no idea you'd been living here all along... and then NANA-senpai, this NANA-senpai, NANA-senpai,"

Shaking her head while arguing with a desperate look on her face,

"Aren't you 'Nana' too? For now, get out here."

NANA-senpai stepped inside, grabbed Linda's hand and dragged her out into the corridor. When she tried to go back inside, she was roughly pushed out again, or rather kicked out by those rubber soles.

"Since you're half-baked, mushy and noisy, go get that 'I want to talk to that guy stuff' out of your system. I'm fed up with your complaining about something I don't understand, so by this way and that, I've made him come here. I've got work to do. And rehearsal. And sleep."

The cold door closed before Linda's nose. At the sound of the key turning from inside, Linda jumped frantically at the door,

"Senpai! Senpai you! I mean, my, shoes! Aren't they in there!?"

Banging on the door, insisting,

"How should I know?"

From inside came only those words. Banging on the door,

"You're an idiot!"

Said Linda, and

"Your shoes and bag are set aside to be burnt."

She said. Sorry! I'm very sorry! Senpai isn't an idiot! Senpai's a genius! Linda's voice repeated over and over, but for now there was no answer.

Linda was standing on tip-toes, with nothing on her feet but light sneaker socks. The door to NANA-sempai's room was of course closed, and Linda looked at Banri with a stiff face.

"...Such..."

"..."

"...things, are though..."

"..."

Banri, already dumbfounded, as if he'd become numb stood up abruptly then and there, and looked Linda over.

Well then, shall we go to my place? ---Though it took him three whole minutes to get those words out.

"You know, that person is one of the original Omaken..."

"Huh!?"

Virtually terrified to go past the awkwardness, Banri could not even draw in an decent breath, and yet,

"But she quit right after I joined. So we've known each other since then."

"That,"

He tried to imagine NANA-senpai, together with the broken job hunter ex-President Hosshii and the ape-like Kosshii-senpai trying to dance the Awa Odori, the Yosakoi or whatever in ecstasy with cigarettes stuck in their mouths, sucking the last of the oxygen from their throats.

"...That... I wouldn't have expected it."

"And that person, her real name isn't 'Nana'. From what she's said, that's not her formal name."

In Banri's room, just the two of them.

"But it seems her parents called her 'Nana'."

Linda, looking bored, stood still for a bit in the hallway by the kitchen.

Meeting Banri's eyes, who stood stock-still in the middle of the room, she laughed, looking a little nervous. In jeans and a tank-top, and over that only a unisex-style shirt, Linda-like, ambiguous, appropriate, a good-looking style.

In the room, still as he left it in the morning, it seemed to him that the tepid air was mixed together with his own body odor.

A crumpled towel-blanket rolled up in a ball, A T-shirt used as sleepware left behind, thrown on the floor. In the sink, there was a big plate and spoon used last night, still dirty where it was, and the cup he drank tea from in the morning, still sitting there. The stool he sat on, still there. Plastic bags from the convenience store, bulging with garbage, were rolling around, and the north-facing curtain was hanging loose, half open.

A dank atmosphere that could not be concealed hung over the room with the two of them. Banri's expression became gloomy once more.

Unable to say 'please laugh', unable to even offer her the slippers he'd bought for Kouko to use, Banri was still in a daze, doing nothing particular in the middle of the situation.

What he should say, what he should do, his thoughts were unsettled. Quietly panicking inside himself, he'd become as silent as a board.

"...Living by himself, in this room."

Linda was murmuring to herself.

Ignoring Banri, he could not answer, she walked in her socks over to the window before the north veranda and looked out over the scenery. There shouldn't have been anything important to see there. Still, this somewhat cluttered neighborhood where Banri lived alone had no scenery to speak of.

"So this is where you live. Banri."

Pressing her forehead to the glass, she spoke a little more clearly this time, as if she were making sure.

Then, turning around and putting the window behind her, she looked towards Banri and took a deep breath. Her throat sounding as if she had been sobbing,

"...Tada, Banri"

While calling his name, Linda was half-covering her face with her hand. While breathing out she hunched her back, hanging her face down sharply. She was talking like that.

"I'm really sorry."

Her voice was soft. One by one, tumbling down like sweets, the sounds gently echoed.

Her shoulders were sagging like somebody weeping, her face was hidden like somebody shedding tears, but it sounded like there was a gentle smile present in Linda's voice.

Her voice gently caressed Banri's ears, his neck and his back like a warm rain shower.

As if melting Banri's coldly frozen life, it enveloped him in a warm, reviving breath.

"Now, even getting to be like this. Even until now, everything. I did horrible things, and created too much confusion."

Standing several yards away, Banri felt his body begin to tremble. He wondered why. Even though it wasn't cold, he could not stop.

Please stop apologizing like that, there's nothing wrong with you, Linda-senpai, I was just running away from you out of worry--- that was what he wanted to say.

But he couldn't say anything.

Banri's intention was to distance himself from her, but his body, now, was simply trembling. And then, slowly but steadily, a dampness begin to overflow from inside him, a strange sensation attacking him. Suddenly, he wondered if he was going to wet his pants. He was astonished at the abrupt feeling of incontinence, but it wasn't even a little bit of ‘leakage'. It was tears.

He didn't understand why it was that tears suddenly started streaming out so surprisingly.

There weren't any emotions overcoming him. Banri couldn't understand why he was crying.

Simply that his body was crying of its own self. It was as if it wasn't his own.

What should I do?

I don't know what I should do.

"...Banri..."

When she noticed Banri's tears, Linda opened her eyes wide as if she had received a shock. Then, almost as if she were jumping, Linda stepped towards Banri. Straightening up, she peered at his face.

"...What's this? Why are you crying? Are you sad? Are you lonely? Are you OK?"

Frantically shaking his head side to side, Banri wiped the tears from his cheek with the base of his thumb. The strength of his body leaving in one breath, he sank down miserably to the floor.

Altogether like a guardian, Linda sat down with him, looked hard into Banri's eyes, and raised her voice as if to persuade him.

"There's been something I've wanted to tell you all along. So much, no matter what, I wanted to say. I am truly happy to see you again. I am really glad."

Taking his shoulder, Linda smiled at him.

"I was wondering what I could do to change things. So I said, 'God, let Banri live.' I was worried, you know? That day, I suddenly heard from somebody they'd found you in the river, badly hurt, unconscious, and all that, with such talk about... he might die, they said. I'm serious. Everybody but me was saying, 'Banri really may have died...' I was rea-lly worried, and scared. I thought, 'If this is a dream, wake me up.'"

As she spoke with a smile, she kept on shaking her head from side to side. She seemed to be trying to persuade him not to cry, that he could not cry.

"And so, my wish came true. You live, and here you are. For something like that, I can give up anything. I would allow it with pleasure. But just one thought... I am wondering just how difficult life must be for you. Just that. If my being here by your side makes it more difficult for you, then perhaps I should leave here, your side. It wouldn't hurt much more inside. Compared to Banri eternally lost, it would still be a joy."

"..."

The reason for these tears, freshly welling up, not even Banri knew.

His own foolishness, his own awareness of being an idiot, was tearing this petty body and heart to pieces. The tears were blood streaming from fresh wounds.

I wonder how mistaken I am, he thought.

I am not even trying to understand the person known as 'Linda'. In my own narrow field of vision, and with a very small scale, I am weighing the heart of this person to my own convenience. If she loved the previous Banri, she probably wants my present self to disappear. Hiding that was probably really hard. Oh, I'm sorry. ---Making such assumptions, in fear because its suits me, always running away without even listening to Linda, I have burdened myself with guilt of my own accord. I thinking of Linda as if I were punishing myself with a stone weight, as if I were saddled with a burden of misfortune.

Even though she was glad this body was here, even like this.

Even though she prayed that his life be spared and remain here.

Somehow, it seemed so. He lived on without dying, and his life was protected, because Linda exchanged it for something. More than just a "lucky accident", as far as Banri was concerned this person always, always seemed to be authentic. She seemed to be the real thing. He felt that to that extent, it was the truth. If he were to look at the person before him, at the person called Linda, carefully, coming to know her well, he would understand a person capable of such things.

He wondered just how bad a fool he'd been.

Really, but how much?

"...I am very sorry...!"

Banri crouched low, pronouncing those words to Linda. Finally, he'd said it to her.

Then, getting up, he pulled an unused bag from the closet. Inside there was a single photograph.

It was the photo of his former self with Linda that he had discovered back home. Under the blue sky, smiling broadly and cheek to cheek, there was the two of them in their high-school years.

Unable to leave it behind, yet unable to look at it either, a weight on his heart that he could not escape, "that time" now changed the very meaning of his existence.

Because such a time had existed, because there was a time that sparkled like this, the present existed too. Because this time living with Linda happened, I was able to survive in this place.

"...Thank you"

Now, meeting up with Linda again, he was living like this, in this place.

Holding the photograph tightly in both hands, pressing it to his chest, he was able to tell Linda those words.

"This... is that so?"

Smiling while looking at the photograph, Linda, who seemed to understand, lowered herself to sit on the floor next to Banri. Sitting on the floor with her knees up and her face against them, while both her hands fiddled around time and again with her ears and hair, she gave a slow nod.

"That's how you knew about me. ...Now I see. It was from having something like this."

"...You and I, what kind of relationship did we have?"

Sitting down in the same pose as hers, Banri asked her what he had always wanted to know. He wiped away his tears with the base of his thumb and continued, his voice coming out smoothly and naturally. It seemed to him that here his pain and suffering was nothing. Before he knew it, he could even smile. But his nose was still running, the drippings salty.

Linda gave him a long, slow look, as if she had missed him.

"We had a truly, really, incredibly good relationship. In the same class all three years of high school, in the same clubs, oddly we felt like--- the best of friends, so to speak. We were always stuck together, the two of us. But, we just weren't dating. Our relationship was beyond good, but it never became a love affair. We would tell each other that even if either of us managed to fall in love, each of us separately getting married and having families, and growing old, we would

always, even as we came to be grandfather and grandmother, stay bosom buddies. It was that kind of relationship."

Banri, again alone, realized his misunderstanding.

Before, he and Linda had hung around together and confided in each other. He wondered, even though they weren't dating, wasn't he, at least, in love with Linda, deep down? The face in that picture seemed to glow with such a fever.

But, it was possible that Linda simply didn't know of those feelings. Unable to convey those feelings still, Tada Banri, had perhaps disappeared entirely from this world.

While thinking that if that were true, it would be a shame, Banri peered down at the pair in the photo. With innocence, with openness, they seemed to be laughing happily. The base of his thumb touched the picture softly, and the tear stuck there fell down over their smiles. Both Banri's face and Linda's.

Linda reached out, wiping it off at once with her dry fingertip.

"Banri was a good guy, whimsical, funny and friendly. But sometimes, he seemed somewhat unreliable. I was forever following Banri around. Like that, saying things like ‘What are you doing? Are you OK? Hey, Banri!' I was always doing like that, looking after him. More than a ‘guy', he might have seemed more like a little brother. Though we were of the same year, I was like his older sister."

"Somehow, things haven't changed much, have they?"

"...Now that you mention it..."

They exchanged glances, which shortly turned comical, both of them cracking up at virtually the same time. Their laughter turned out strangely light-hearted.

It really did. Banri and Linda's relationship had not changed after all. He had lost his memories, they had left their homes, time had passed, and they were doing the same things. Linda the surrogate older sister was looking after foolish Banri, following and covering for him.

Come to think of it, from the beginning, from the moment the current Banri met Linda, it had always been so. The one who rescued Banri from the tumult of the entrance ceremony, Linda. The one who saved him when he was kidnapped by that strange cult too. And from then on, as his club senior, Linda kept Banri under watch always, worrying about him, watching over him.

"I mean, I am somewhat of a disgraceful fellow... but isn't that the same as saying that I'm so useless that I cannot live without Linda-senpai? There was a chance that I might have gone to a different college, and if we hadn't met up like that at the entrance ceremony, then about now I wouldn't have the self-confidence for living."

Linda gave Banri an exaggerated laugh at that, but he really did think that way.

If Linda had not been watching over him, and had not been standing by his side, protecting him, his current self wouldn't be here, he felt from the bottom of his heart. ...Specifically, for now, perhaps on that mountain, he, together with Kouko, would have fallen prey to the Crystal God.

He looked at Linda's face again. Laughing "What's this?", her face had a gentle shape.

Plainly, she was an angel. As far as Banri was concerned, Linda was clearly a guardian angel.

Sheltered under that person's gentle wings, one way or the other, he lived. In this way, blessed with a strong guardian, his existence was possible.

Even he recognized it: he didn't have the power to do it by himself.

"That's not true! Don't think you cannot live if I'm not around. It's just not so. The truth is, you are not such a weak man, Tada Banri. I guarantee it."

Turning about, from right in front of him, Linda looked back at Banri. She looked him straight in the eyes.

"But hey, I don't think that your life from now on will be a piece of cake. So hey, from now on, as your senior in the club... or rather, as a friend you met in college, plus, as a person who knew you before your accident, I think I can be a good support for you. Unless that bothers you."

"It's such a bother! Why, it's not nothing! But..."

Scratching his face a bit, not really wanting to say it,

Because he couldn't think what the "reason" was.

However, Linda's eyes opened wide in surprise, as if she were asking "What're you saying?"

"But you aren't Banri. Naturally not. Even if you have forgotten, you are an important person to me. ...Meaning that I enjoy being with you. Though you've changed, you are unchanged. For me, the time I spend with Tada Banri now is enjoyable. And so, I was thinking I want to spend some time together with you, in a normal way. That's all it is. ...You know what I mean?"

Smiling sweetly, Linda extended her right hand to him.

Nervously about to try and take that hand,

"This kind of thing is over."

She gave him a strong high-five, then suddenly gripped his raised hand firmly. She let go at once, then pointed at his face. That was their proof of being best friends, apparently. And then Linda

suddenly stood up lightly.

With convenient timing Banri's cell-phone rang, and at a glance he saw that it was Kouko. He urged Linda not to leave yet as he pressed the answer button.

'Hello, Tada-kun? How's the flooding?'

"Ah, well... that was OK for sure, though..."

'In truth, I've had some problems here too. Is it OK to talk now?'

While giving an ear to Kouko's voice, he looked over towards Linda, wondering what he should do. Linda lightly raised one hand and with a low voice,

"I'm going back next door. Catch you later."

Still barefoot, she went to leave. Disconcerted, Banri covered the telephone mouthpiece with his hand,

"Ah, hold on... you can use my sandals if you want! Err, they've got to be around here somewhere..."

"It's okay. Don’t worry about it. Stay by Kouko-chan's side and listen to what she has to say. If you love her, you must not leave her side. Never. See ya."

Linda opened the door and, in her normal light-footed way, went out. Supple, quite like a capricious cat on a street corner.

* * *

Riding the train, he gazed at the route maps pasted on the wall with an uneasy feeling. Was he going to arrive safe and sound at Mitsuo's place or not?

It was the train he used for his normal commute, but the station near Mitsuo's place was the next one further from the college than the one near where Banri lived.

It was the first time he'd come to this district since arriving in the capital. The bright sunlight had already begun slanting, giving the view through the shaking windows of the spreading Tokyo townscape a strong orange tint. Condominiums all standing lined up tightly together, as if glued to each other yet haphazardly, pachinko parlors, questionable looking pink chain store advertisements standing off to one side, and in the other direction thickly growing green belts. Together with the darkening sky, it all seemed so vast.

The evening rush hour must've been building up. The train was beginning to get a little crowded, with the uniformed shapes of middle schoolers quite noticable, and here and there regular passengers standing around too.

The cell-phone that Banri held still contained the address for Mitsuo's place that they'd politely exchanged when they'd only first met.

Though up to now Mitsuo had only come to Banri's place, there was no particular significance to the switch. It was just that Banri's place was closer to the university, and Mitsuo had many opportunities to pass by casually. This time Banri asked if it was all right if he went to Yana-ssan's place, and Mitsuo said it was fine.

...Because he'd said that, and said he didn't have to call ahead... sort of... so, he trusted in that and got on the train.

Though he said he didn't need to make prior arrangements, he was heading that way now, so of course he sent a text message. He'd tried calling him several times. Still, there wasn't any reply. He sent a message off to Kouko too, but there was no reply yet from that quarter either.

Kouko's status said "Mitsuo may be in crisis."

She said it was after that. As for where Kouko had observed that he might be in crisis, she said that after Banri had been tricked into returning in a hurry by NANA-senpai's bogus phone call, the person in question had left the school cafeteria by himself, "lonely" and "sad", according to her.

The campus being as busy as usual, and by herself, carrying a tray, searching for a seat too, conscious of other people's eyes on her, it seemed that Kouko was rather desperate to find somebody she knew. And then, spotting Two Dimensions and Mitsuo and drawing near, she sat down with the guys without saying anything. In the end, nervous and alone, she sat down in a chair somewhat apart.

Shortly thereafter Ultrasonic--- Chinami showed up, leading some other girls.

"When she said 'Oh, it's Yana!' I knew that spoiled, yapping voice. I knew at once."

It seemed that Chinami said something like "Today I'm not letting you escape!" Kouko looked her way, and Chinami was about to approach him smiling, brightly, as if clearly nothing had happened. She behaved herself as if nothing had changed from before.

For a while, Mitsuo stayed with the other guys, but eventually saying "Chinami, could we have a moment?" he invited her off to the side.

Since that place off to the side, so to speak, happened to be right in front of Kouko, she pretended to be asleep for now, turning her face down to hide it with the tray by her side. Then,

"Mitsuo spoke like this. He said, 'Because the other guys notice, would you not call out to me? I've noticed that everybody's laughing at me.' At which Ultrasonic said 'Like that, forever?', and Mitsuo replied 'forever.' So Ultrasonic said 'I will do as you wish' and walked away, leaving Mitsuo there for a while, looking down at the floor. I was desperately pretending to sleep. Wondering if it was okay yet... I lifted my face and Mitsuo was still there; I was looking directly at him. I was thinking, 'This is bad!' and I tried to say 'Hi!' to him, but he ignored me completely and left. Since then, he didn't come out to third period, he's ignored the texts I've sent... I've been a bit worried."

Through the telephone speaker, Kouko's voice seemed quite colored by worry. Then,

"So I thought I should call you and ask if you could go over to Mitsuo's place and check it out. Hey, it's not like I can just go over there myself, right?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Don't you want to?"

"No, it doesn't bother me, or rather, I'm worried about Yana-ssan too, and though I'm completely OK with going, what do you mean by 'It's not like I can just go over there myself'?"

"No way, what are you saying? Though you're my boyfriend, there's no way I can go into the places of other guys living alone. Two people of the opposite sex, secluding themselves in a private room, isn't that scandalous? Shouldn't it be? Am I not right?"

"S-so...?"

"Right?"

"...It's so."

"Yes, it is!"

---If that's the case, then haven't we been fooling around already?

But of course, he didn't say that. Banri set the matter at first priority for now. Leaving his room alone, he took this train. Kouko must've already gone to fourth period by now, or if there wasn't a lecture she was probably on her way home.

He'd thought about bringing Kouko along too, but he had an uneasy feeling about what Mitsuo would think of that, and if worst came to worst, and Mitsuo wasn't home, having stepped out somewhere for a bit, then it seemed to him easier to just return home by himself.

As he neared his intended station, the platform came into view. Banri was trying to calm the uneasy feeling in his chest, taking deep breaths repeatedly. When he finally reached this guy's place, it would probably be the first time he didn't get lost in this town. Then he wondered if the

guy was OK.

It seemed to him that this was surely "Mitsuo's Crisis."

The guy who had to tell the girl he loved to stop calling out to him… it was that Mitsuo. About now without a doubt he was feeling really depressed, descending into self-loathing.

The train's brakes slowly engaging, Banri stood up from his seat. Not having any bag, he had his wallet in his pocket and his cell-phone in his hand.

With only local trains stopping at this station, there weren't many people getting off. Walking across the empty platform, he went up the stairs. There was a north ticket gate and a few south ticket gates, and wondering which he should use, he tried the north gate because of the address.

Beep, he left the ticket gate using his pass.

"Err..."

Banri looked around the area a bit.

Though it was the first time he'd gotten off at the station, it was arranged the same as many before. It seemed to him that not even the scenery was all that different. What caught his eye at first was the same signs as ever: Tonkatsu Saboten, Century 21 and so forth. But even so, the shopping district didn't seem as nice, nor were there so many shoppers as in the neighborhood where Banri lived. You could even call it dreary.

He checked Google Maps on his cell-phone, then followed the main street to the right.

Along the sidewalk, a row of Ginkgo trees grew thickly.

Even with the slanted sunlight, the humidity was strangely high today, and Banri was flapping his two-layered T-shirt, trying to pass some air under it.

Walking straight ahead like that, didn't he say it was a few minutes from the station ticket gate? Turning at his landmark, the building of a small device manufacturer, and looking carefully at the map, he rounded a tricky corner into an alleyway. Down that way was the apartment where Mitsuo lived.

A quite normal, nondescript two-story building. Adequate for a poor student to live in, it was a traditional wooden apartment. Banri's place a phoenix from the ashes by comparison, you could say this place was very old, but more than giving the impression of falling apart, it seemed really cool. Many trees and plants were planted on the grounds, growing thick and dense, bringing a certain charm it seemed to him.

There were no automatic locks of course, so he just went up to the second floor via the outside stairs. Mitsuo's room should be #203.

Seeing as he'd been ignoring texts and phone calls, whether he'd come out or not when his doorbell was rung was a good question. For that matter, whether or not he was in his room was a good question.

But for now, about to step forward into the corridor,

"Hey Yana."

He froze. Without thinking, he backed down the stairwell a bit and hid himself.

"So really, I'm not feeling good today..."

"So aren't I worried about you?"

"Didn't I say 'I want to be left alone today'...?"

"There's no way I can, didn't I say I was making you dinner? Hey look, look, I bought something for you."

Framed by the room's open door, a young lady was arguing about something. Dealing with her from inside the room, no mistaking him, was Yanagisawa Mitsuo. A shopping bag dangling from her hand, she was saying "Since I finally brought it, let me in. I'll leave soon." and clinging to him, was surely a second year from Film Studies... or was it a third-year? Once or twice before, no three times or four, ...perhaps even more. In the times he'd been with Mitsuo, the senpai had called out to him quite frequently. Banri remembered out of the college's myths and legends there was a really beautiful girl, with a strikingly showy face (though not to Kouko's level!), and yet,

"Was, was it that one...!?"

Banri pulled his head back for the moment, gasping a little. That senpai, as Banri remembered her, normally wore boots or something like that, a denim shirt and a skirt with a flowery design. Indeed, she dressed casually as you might expect a female college student to.

But now, in her thick, light brown, curly hair, there was a purple satin hairband.

She was wearing a feminine one-piece dress, with a bold green print design, and delicate high-heeled sandals. She had what appeared to be a brand-name bag slung from her shoulder, and there were large, bright sparkles on her ears, her fingers and her chest.

She was, how to say it, ...a faux-Kouko.

On her white face she wore a deeply colored lipstick, made to match the hairband. But it wasn't even that. For now she was rather frightening, in several ways.

"Hey, Yana, do you like Nikujaga?"

Timidly, he peeked out once more. Somehow, the senpai-turned-faux-Kouko was about to step into Mitsuo's room, the toe of her sandal pushing into the crack of the door.

"N-no, I'm serious..."

"Ingredient-wise, you know we could even do curry? Hey, which will it be? I mean, with all day free... you said if I felt like it, I could stay over. So, are you going to open up?"

"...Really, seriously..."

"Will, you, open, up?"

Mitsuo, though he was trying to close the door, nevertheless felt uncomfortable with the notion of crushing her toes, and remained frozen there with a worried expression on his face.

He found her assault troublesome, was clearly unaware Banri was watching them, and scared she wouldn't leave. A little dangerous. So he thought.

It would be a good thing if he rescued his younger friend from this situation.

"...Get moving, Yana-ssan!"

Banri jumped into the corridor.

And then, walking briskly, getting nearer quickly,

"My Boyfriend..."

He stood, one hand on his hip like a model. Muttering thickly yet rapidly, he tried to wedge himself into the space between them with an angry shoulder. How about it, will she back off? Sticking up for Mitsuo, flashing his teeth in his own special way, he gave her a challenging pose.

"Banri...!"

Mitsuo's happy sounding voice was at the back of his head. And then senpai,

"...Uwaa..."

Muttering disagreeably "what's with this guy?" she glanced at Banri and took a step back.

"Hiii, Yana-ssan."

Banri, playing the role of an effeminate model still, the spitting image of a lovely girlfriend, raised his chin and looked at her, his eyes half closed. They looked downwards on her, like guns firing. She flinched a bit, but she wasn't defeated. With a sharp look, staring back at Banri,

"Hold on, what? Hey Yana, what's with this guy?"

With a nasal voice, trying the snuggle against Mitsuo,

"This guy is my boyfriend."

He'd won--- Banri exclaimed "Han!" in triumph and drew yet closer to her.

"What if I want Nikujaga too!?"

"I'm not making Nikujaga for you!"

Spinning on her heels, she retreated. Her thirst for blood was for the time being hidden by the sound of her heels as she went down the stairs.

"Sa, saved...! That was frightening... that person was showing an awful lot of cleavage...!"

Seeing her back off from the open door, Mitsuo, as if he felt relieved from the very bottom of his heart, took Banri's hand. Saying "Hush hush, Uncle's here so it's all right now," Banri nodded deeply.

"I haven't felt up to answering my mail," apologized Mitsuo, inviting him into his room and yet,

"Ooh oh oh oh oh... ohohoh oh oh oh..."

In all honesty, he wasn't expecting this. Becoming a little like Kouko, Banri surveyed the state of the room. My oh my, Mitsuo...

"Dirty, isn't it? ...Surprised?"

"Or rather, a feeling of 'What's wrong?'"

Wearing a T-shirt and shorts, and on his neck headphones set loud enough you could hear the sound spilling out, an over-long cable slithering behind him in an entirely homey style, Mitsuo nervously rubbed his chin. Even if he'd gotten like this, he still had a handsome face.

"These few days, I've entirely lost my energy for cleaning and tidying up..."

"If she had seen this, even that senpai would have retreated on her own, perhaps."

"...Perhaps"

His admission that it was pretty untidy surprising even Banri, it was indeed a cluttered place.

Not very spacious, at best a six tatami single room, there was cast-off clothing taking up space here and there, on the table there were some cup-ramen with soup still remaining, chopsticks, and who knows how many empty and partially emptied PET bottles. There were dirty dishes in

the little kitchen's sink, and somehow a mountain of convenience store garbage tossed in there too. Unrestrained by the door to the combined bath and toilet facility, wet smells, towels and whatever else bulged out. For now, you could hardly see the floor. He could barely make out what appeared to be vinyl flooring.

"But for now, I know exactly what I have and where it is."

As soon as he said that, Mitsuo stepped crack on something barefoot, and his handsome face twisted. By the sound of it, it might have been a CD case. In a panic he tried to lift his foot and lost his balance, and his headphone plug popped out from the notebook computer it had been plugged in to.

From the speakers flooded very loud male vocal music. The high-pitched, slow and mellow singing voice and the clear sounds of a trombone for some reason or other didn't seem to fit Mitsuo.

"...What I'm listening to has a curious feel to it."

He muttered that he wasn't even asking. "The Legend of 'Doing Something'..." Mitsuo said it was. Whether that was a joke or not, he didn't understand right away.

"Wh, what?"

"...No, it's like the song's title though. Or rather... I really am useless right now. I really have to do something. To this room... and then to my life..."

Mitsuo crouched down and moved the mouse, stopped the music, tore off his headphones, threw them aside and sat down on his bed. Removing the pile of clothing and magazines there with a thud,

"Sit there?"

He was suggesting that Banri sit next to him. While saying "Ah, OK" and sitting down, he was thinking "I don't want to sit side by side with him on the bed... definitely not..." Mitsuo for some reason gave an embarrassed grin.

"During the day this serves as a sort of sofa."

"No, it's a bed... this is absolutely a bed..."

But even so, for the time being, you could see on his face a feeling of relief.

"Well, it's nice to see you feeling better for the moment. Because we were rather worried about you. Because, err..."

"...I suppose Kouko heard something?"

"Something, or rather, so she did... yes, the whole story..."

His face unreadable, Mitsuo shrugged his shoulders, turned on the television and fiddled with the remote control. He changed channels randomly.

The slightly awkward silence continued between the two bums in a closed room. Banri tried to bring it back on topic.

"That reminds me. That senpai, what the heck was she doing?"

"Aah..." answered Mitsuo, his tension easing.

"About that... Word must have gotten out about Chinami turning me down. Shortly afterwards, I was getting persistent texts already. Are you okaaay? Can't we go drinking? Aren't you feeling down? Her attacks finally got to this point today. Saying she would go shopping for me... telling me she could stay over, for me it was just scary, I mean, she was really showing off one huge chest. It wasn't the cleavage and such, but rather those points of hers... seemed like they reached the floor. They were kinda beige. Isn't that a crime already? Against me."

At those comments, Banri laughed involuntarily, but,

"It's not a laughing matter. ...I mean, everybody knows about it. About Chinami dumping me. What? Why? Are people that interested in what happens to others?"

Mitsuo sighed, his feeble shoulders drooping, his head hanging.

"Well, there were certainly many witnesses... that was probably it."

The actual place where Mitsuo was dumped was a big drinking party with dozens of people. Chinami was already a central person amongst the first-years, and Mitsuo's appearance was outstanding; he was a conspicuous fellow, and, with rumor calling out to rumor, Banri didn't think it mysterious that word had spread even to the upperclassmen.

In his completely beaten state, Mitsuo's expression clouded over.

"It seems to me that everybody knows about my problems, and I really don't like to be in the public eye, so to speak... I have gotten strangely self-conscious, even nervous, that I have been floundering around too much, only deepening my wounds, and getting the feeling that I'm making mistakes in just about everything."

"I see..."

So, for the guy who stands out, it hurts becoming the guy who stands out? Banri looked around the wreckage inside the room and thought, in this room lives Mitsuo's heart.

"...Of course I understand. How am I supposed to behave towards Chinami? Should I be acting

the same as always, cheerfully, as if all were easy? Even though I knew that... I couldn't hardly do it, as I thought, I wasn't able to. If I ran into her, I'd think 'whoa', be embarrassed, get depressed. Everybody would see me that way and laugh, and I'd be thought of as something beneath them... and so on over and over. And now this mess. What am I going to do? I'm too useless. It's horrible."

"It doesn't seem 'horrible'."

"No, it's horrible."

"About your girlfriend," Mitsuo changed the topic.

"As you might expect, I resent Kouko."

"O, Oh... So you do resent her."

Mitsuo nodded 'yes' to him.

"Very much. I feel like I've been used as a stepping stone. She drove me into a corner, even forcing me to change universities. But in the end, she found a place to settle before I did. After holding me back for so long, she went on ahead, just like that. It's frustrating... But there's no point in saying that to Kouko. 'Don't go out with Banri because it's mortifying to me.'"

"No, stop that... seriously..."

"I won't say it. I won't say anything, ever. If Kouko settles down with you, then as far as I'm concerned, that's a good thing. One way or the other, she's a childhood friend. Though it's impossible for me to love her. Regardless of any feelings... Sorry for telling you this, am I bothering you?"

Banri answered "Not at all, I understand," and Mitsuo gave an obvious sigh of relief.

"...Cause you are a friend. I want you two to be happy. Really, I do... I mean, when I decided to end everything with her, I wanted you to stay by her side. I thought if you were there, she'd be fine. I still think so. That's why I can consent to it, even be a bit glad. It's just, I can't help but feel frustrated that I've been left behind. Like, it's just me! Just me! In a place like this! You know...?"

With his speech faltering, Mitsuo seemed to be ashamed of what he was saying, his mouth twisting.

After a while,

"...Just me, left behind at the very bottom, as this sorry mess. Here I am, speaking ill of my childhood friend in front of her boyfriend, my friend."

How about this? Seeming to want to say something, he raised his hand. Mitsuo was staring vacantly into space, seeming to want help from a god, or an angel, or some such thing. He said a little more, as if speaking to himself.

"It isn't... resentment. More precisely, I'm envious. You guys seem to be radiating happiness. I want to sparkle the way Kouko does. I wanted to become like that. But of myself I cannot do things well, getting together with Chinami, being able to be friends with her too, anything could be believed of the future. ...But being dumped like that by Chinami..."

"Yana-ssaan..."

"Chinami is the only one for me. But as far as Chinami is concerned, I am only 'one of them.' It doesn't matter that I love her, I am just one of many others. ...It's Kouko's fault, of course. By chasing me so insanely, she made me think that I had to be something special. Despite being a nobody, I was not at all used to it. I thought, why? Why is it that Chinami cannot come to love me? And then, why? Why would she have said such things then? It seemed that I was no longer eligible to be loved, that I deserved it, it seems like."

With Banri right next to him, Mitsuo was tying himself up more and more in a masochistic loop. He would say so much that he would hurt himself, and then blame himself for his hurt self yet again. Truth be told, it is only natural that that man would feel jealous. His appearance was outstanding, and he was furthermore raised well and rich (though for the moment brought low), as a good person.

In short, not at all self-confident, Banri thought. In spite of the handsome profile he presented, it seemed this man could not see his own good qualities at all. Though perhaps even Mitsuo masochistically saying that Kouko was to blame was not all that far off target. Not wanting to be loved, not wanting to be chased after, wanting to be released and continuing to dwell on his teenage years, it was possible that Mitsuo was only being made to learn how to put himself down.

Don't chase me, you don't have to love me, because for me there is no value in being loved so much! ---For example, like that. To the last, there in Banri's convenient imagination.

It suddenly made him think of Linda. Whenever he was in a tight spot, looking for help, the hands reaching out to him was always hers. Supporting him.

He thought, these hands were caught, pulled up, by Linda's hands.

These hands that were helped by Linda, perhaps he should use them now for the sake of his friend, to pull him out of this masochistic loop he is in. He wanted to take those hands firmly. ...Nonetheless meaning that figuratively, of course. In a literal sense, not letting go of Mitsuo's hands would be weird. But.

"...Yana-ssan. Hold on."

From his back pocket, Banri pulled out a sparkling mirror and opened it with a click. It was the commemorative present, the hand-mirror Kouko had given him.

"...What's this?"

"Look in here, at that mug of yours."

He told him to look at that handsome face. If this is reality, then to the extent that it is OK to be proud of one's self, he could be proud. It's just fine for such a cool-looking guy to stick out his chest impressively and swagger along. That was what he meant, and yet,

"Oh... thanks, Banri..."

With a forced smile, Mitsuo, embarrassed, directed dull eyes at him. While peering into the hand mirror and scrubbing around his mouth with his thumb,

"It's a bit of nori... from some convenience store Temakizushi I ate..."

I hadn't noticed it, he said.

And then, in that empty place, an echo of Two Dimension's voice sounded in Banri's tired ears. Saying to somebody, 'That's one of Yana-ssan's good points...' This guy's fine as he is. Because of this, it's good.

Closing the mirror, he stood up.

"Well then, you even found some Nori! Sushi! Hand made sushi! You ate it! For now, follow me!"

Playing the part of a complete fool, giving him a thumbs up, Banri struck a pose in front of Mitsuo, waving his arms as if to say, "Let's go!" The depressed hunk, looking confused,

"...What? What are you doing?"

"Let's clean this place up! And then, who knows what next!? I mean, when you live in a dirty place like this, of course you get depressed."

Mitsuo focused his still somewhat glassy eyes and looked around his cluttered room.

"I suppose... it is, but..."

"No 'buts'! You're a total slob! Stand up! Hurry up! Uvoi!"

"Uvoi? What's that?"

"It means 'Get over here now!' You should understand that already!"

Eh? Mitsuo was still sitting there moaning. Clapping his hands in front of him,

"This is an order! Clean up! Come now, move it! Because I'm going to help too!"

Standing there in a threatening way, Banri bossed him around as if he were his older brother.

In reality, Banri was still just an inexperienced kid. I mean, truth be told, he's just a little one year old baby. Nevertheless, acting as if he were older, he wanted to somehow show Mitsuo the way out of his difficult situation. He wanted to make him stand up, even if it be by force, and clean up the filthy place. As Linda did for him, he wanted to help somebody too.

He wanted to hide his inexperience beneath a mask of "older friend".

"First of all, let's take out the garbage! Things that go bad, over there! Sushi! I mean, can you put out trash any time you want?"

"...No. Burnable trash goes tomorrow morning."

"Well then, if we collect the trash, then let's go to my place. You can stay over! I mean, let's talk. Let's drink! So, if you're going to come back in the morning to put out the trash, don't sleep in! Let's do it, really!"

Mitsuo lifted his face a little and looked at Banri's face. In helpless eyes like an abandoned dog's, and the nod of somebody older, his assent could be seen.

And then, with both hands grasping unseen sticks, *boom! boom!*, he swung both his arms.

"...What's that?"

"War drums! There he is! Yana-ssan, garbage bag in hand!"

"Ah, is that 'helping out'...?"

Come on now, aren't we heading out to war!? Banri really was, of course, ready to help out the best he could, encouraging him to the best of his ability.

"...What's that?"

"I'm the cheering squad! Ora! Throw out that rotten ramen broth right now!"

Chapter 3

3

Tada Banri was walking.

Accompanied by Yanagisawa Mitsuo, he was going over a cross-walk.

The traffic light flashing, the two of them messed around like dogs, playfully laughing out "Watch out!" "Run, run!" as they broke into a run. Each of them had plastic supermarket bags in both hands, swinging heavily.

"...Wait..."

As for me,

"...Wait for me, Banri..."

Already, no more words than that came out.

Not having completely finished crossing when the light turned red, I crouched down in the middle of the road. The cars started up, passing through one after another. Without me even raising my head, I was run over and shot through. Nobody even hit the brakes for me.

And then, I couldn't scream. The voice to scream "Please stop!", "Please help me!" wouldn't come out.

Obviously. Because I'm dead.

Banri went walking ahead, not even looking back at me. Though I called "wait", he couldn't hear me. He didn't even notice.

Even though there are things that should be said, this voice reaches nobody and there is not a person in this world that knows that I am here.

No matter how much I cry and scream "I'm here!" nobody notices.

I have never known such loneliness before. I understood it to be a blessing. It was my intention to surrender myself to it entirely. I thought that I would accept this fate calmly, resisting its approach being futile. I was watching over Tada Banri. In my own way I even imagined that even with the passing of decades, until in due time Banri died, I would still be doing this.

But in that moment, when Linda cried, I understood. In Banri's room, Linda laughed, but in her heart she was crying. I didn't understand that because I'm a ghost. I always listen closely to Linda's voice. So I understood.

I had made a promise. If Linda were to cry, I would absolutely come running. So, that time I thought, "I wish I could have been beside her." I abide by my promises, unchangingly. I wanted the power to get close to the crying Linda. To reach out to her, to talk to her. To try and touch with those fingers her shoulders, her back, her hair, over and over again.

And then I finally realized it.

I couldn't touch Linda ever again.

This voice would never reach her again.

There was no point in being a ghost at her side, his very existence unknown from the start, and besides, Linda had given up on me entirely.

Trying another time...

"...Banri... please wait..."

Nobody understands me any more. Why should I go through things like that so calmly? It's not okay. There is no way it would be okay. Since I died, my mind seems to have become strange: crying, shouting, raging. Clinging to Banri, biting him, screaming to you who lives to do something. Do something to this me. And yet, nothing changes. Nobody notices me.

I thought I was afraid of disappearing.

But now, I'm afraid of things never ending.

He wondered if he would be able to take it if things stayed like this forever. If there is no end. If I must continue to exist forever, just myself as I am now, having nothing to do with life and death, forever. If my parents died, and Banri, and Linda and everybody else I ever knew died, and there was no end.

"...Hey you, wait up!"

Wiping the overflowing tears from my cheeks with my hand, I stood up desperately. Chasing after the departed Banri, I cried aloud as I ran unsteadily. I've been trying hard so far. But I don't want to be set aside. I don't want to be left behind by myself in such a place.

As I was running, it dawned on me. Banri was more than a year further along than me in living.

* * *

In front of the apartment entrance there was a tall figure, easily recognized from a distance,

"Sorry, Two Dimensions, were you waiting!?"

When Banri and Mitsuo rushed over, he turned towards them.

"Hmm, you're late! I've been waiting!"

His face suddenly resembled that of a toad, puffed out. He twisted at the waist. However much Two Dimensions was his bosom buddy, when he was disgusting he was disgusting. They automatically exchanged wordless glances, and he tried to pass by as if he were a stranger, but,

"Wasn't this set for 6 o'clock!? It's already been fifteen minutes!"

From that tall figure's shadow suddenly, and in the same tone,

"If you were going to go shopping for us, then you could at least have met up with us at the supermarket!"

A beautiful white face made its appearance.

"...You've got to be kidding. Really, I'm not mad at all. If I can see Tada-kun's face, then 15 minutes or an hour makes no difference. Just being able to meet up with him, I am h-a-p-p-y."

With four steps she closed on Banri, fastening on to his left arm like a baby monkey. That, of course, was Kaga Kouko, who he didn't remember calling. Mumbling "Hmm!?" he looked into her face. Responding with an "Ufu!" Kouko tilted her head, looking back up at his eyes.

Two Dimensions took four pigeon-toed steps and clung to Mitsuo too,

"Being able to meet up with Yana-ssan, I am h-a-p-p-y too."

Refusing him with all he had, "Kii!" he shook himself hysterically to be let go. That "kii", perhaps, was a "kii" of disgust.

Surprise! Kouko's eyes were sparkling, but no, he really was surprised. Banri thought he'd only called Two Dimensions to this "get-together to cheer up Yanagisawa Mitsuo @ my place." He'd even sent a text to Kouko telling her not to worry about it.

"Wh, why? Why is Kaga-san here?"

And yet, hadn't she even come entirely changed? Even her hair style was different from how it was at noon. Over an unusual earth-toned no-sleeve blouse, she wore a large necklace, knee-length pants, and the bangs of her long hair were raised up with a beaded hair-band. Like a bright lemon-yellow plaything, a little bag hung quietly across the middle of her back, and, exposing her beautiful legs yet more, she wore gladiator high heels that could kick them to death, had they been sheep.

"You're happy, aren't you? Won't you say you're happy?"

Dressed in style for drinking at home, Kouko hung her entire weight on Banri's left arm, fawning over him.

"Ah, well, of course..."

"I'm happy, I'm happy! I'm super happy to be able to see Kaga-san!"

"Hmm... hearing that, I'm happy too..."

She rubbed her round forehead ecstatically against Banri's shoulder, like a really adorable animal. She was lovely, but that was that, and this is this. Pulling back a little,

"No, seriously, why'd you come...?"

Asked again by Banri, Kouko replied "Cut it out, what're you saying?" a little miffed. Only her eyebrows tipping up,

"Don't you see? Aren't I your girlfriend? Can't I come see you if I want to? Isn't it obvious?"

"Right!?" Turning, Kouko looked at Two Dimensions. Two Dimensions shrugged his shoulders a little and laughed. Saying "Hey, it's just common sense," she turned back towards Banri.

"Though I thought even Tada-kun understood it, if he didn't know it, now he does. When I want to see him, I will go see him. Because I'm your girlfriend, it is only natural. Be ready, 365 days, 24 hours a day. OK? OK, right? Understood? You understand, right?"

"Well enough."

She didn't let him say anything more. And she pressed her index finger firmly down on Banri's lips. Doing that, Kouko chuckled, and bringing her face even closer to his,

"Actually, I've been sticking around here since about five o'clock. I was wondering if I ought to go home already. Then Two Dimensions showed up, and when I called out to him he told me about the drinking party. Wasn't it already decided I would be at such things? I mean, I want to hear why I shouldn't. ...Why didn't you call me?"

Her face suddenly went serious.

She was cross-examining him, but her finger still sealed his lips. Banri being unable to even try and answer, from his side Mitsuo raised his hand in reply.

"Wasn't it decided!? Because the get-together today was to cheer me up! It's because I wasn't going to get cheered up with you there!"

"I didn't ask your opinion."

Ignoring such comments with a snort, Kouko stared at Banri motionlessly, as if she were making fun of him.

"Hey, Tada-kun. ...No, 'password Tada'. The reply? And who am I?"

"...'Tiffany Kaga'..."

Banri answered.

Incidentally, Two Dimensions' was 'Kilobyte Satou' --- that making the three names of their pact.

With the simple vow "if any of us goes to a drinking party, we would all attend without fail," these three had bound themselves together. If any of them were to break their vow, something important would be lost to them.

"It is, isn't it? So, according to our oath, it is by all means my right to participate in this drinking party... no, it is my duty. Isn't that so? It is, isn't it? And so, the person who shouldn't be here..."

Striking a pose like a model, Kouko, pointing at Mitsuo and lightly sticking out her chin,

"Mitsuo. *Rentre chez toi*."

She declared to all the rest, her eyes cold. Snap, from the area of Mitsuo's temples came the sound of something breaking,

"..."

Still silent, he took off his boots, ready to use them to hit Kouko. "Hold on, hold on!" Banri shielded Kouko behind his back, but Kouko took off her gladiators and brandished them,

"There's no way your Red Wings are going to beat my Jimmy Choos!"

"Aren't you going to say anything about the crap those soles stepped in last week!?"

"Crap nothing! I've got studs over here!"

"Idi-ot, idi-ot! Shunned woman!"

"Crap-stepping man!"

"You're even using a shiny yellow bag like a kindergartner's! Are you trying to look cute!?"

"Huh!? What are you saying!? Isn't it a Celine!? Ah, is that it? Is your head scrambled so completely from being dumped so much that you don't even know what a Celine is!? Mitsuo, you are so pitiful!"

"Who's the pitiful one, you prune-face!?"

"A free perm! Cheap perm solutions kill your hair at the roots!"

"Butt chin!"

"Are you ready to say 'bye-bye' to your hair for eternity?"

Banri was stuck there in the street, in the middle of an unseemly shoe battle unfolding between two childhood friends: closing from the left crap, and from the right studs. Both were scary to about the same degree.

"Eeek! Two Dimensions, please do something! Two Dimensions!"

"Uh, hold on. Phone."

But Two Dimensions of course lived in another dimension, ignoring everything, playing with his iPhone,

"Is something coming over the phone!? Really, pull these people apart!"

"I mean... its Oka-chan though. Incoming call. Shall I answer? Should I answer?"

Hearing his voice like that, the boot fell *plop* from Mitsuo's hand. Kouko stopped moving too, and traded glances with Banri.

"...Oh. She hung up."

Nobody said anything for a bit, a fragile silence continuing for several seconds. Of all times now, at a time like this, the phone rings with Oka Chinami---

Kouko, seeing Mitsuo's loss of fighting spirit, casually caught hold of Banri while she put her gladiators back on, but Mitsuo stood there like an idiot, one foot shoeless still.

"Eh, eh, eh, what...? In other words...? Two Dimensions is close enough to Chinami that she shared her phone number? Eh? What? How? A-at what moment...? No, I mean, not that I'm all that concerned... I'm not... no..."

And on he went muttering.

No way was that sorrow. Two Dimensions, stuffing his iPhone in his pocket with a slightly impatient look,

"No, not at all! She said it wasn't anything special! The other day the two of us were just killing time, and that's when we exchanged numbers! That's all! I mean, that was the first time she's called me!"

Banri looked at him. That occasion "killing time", it must've been when Banri had fled from Linda.

For now, they were going to have to get an explanation of how Two Dimensions and Chinami "suddenly gotten close." He thought the explanation sounded really contrived, but he let it slide without doing a special investigation of the two.

Of course it would seem strange, wouldn't it? With his current sight, Banri understood anew. However, explaining it would take an awful long time.

"...Haha. Ha. ...Laugh."

Mitsuo put a hand on Kouko's shoulder. "Don't touch me so easily," said Kouko, brushing him off quickly,

"Don't you want to laugh at my embarrassment? It's OK. Go ahead and laugh. Laugh at me... it's OK, all you want, have your fill at my clumsiness..."

Seeing Mitsuo as he was, exhausted and forcing a pitiful laugh, a sad look came to her face. Turning around then as if troubled, she looked in Banri's eyes. 'What should we do?' those eyes were asking him.

If you were to look at that face--- or rather, he had known from the start. In the various things she'd said, Kouko was definitely worried over Mitsuo. Dissatisfied with the message Banri had sent, she had, without a doubt, come to see Mitsuo's condition with her own eyes. But because she could not come to Mitsuo's apartment, for the time being she'd tried coming to Banri's place.

Because he knew that well, Banri had no choice but speak for Kouko, who couldn't speak very cleverly for herself.

"Come on now... Yana-ssan. Kaga-san was really worried about you. There was nothing I could say to a person like that."

---Even though she's my girlfriend! Who was only concerned about the guy! It's annoying! It's frustrating! After all, wasn't there no future left there!? What are you thinking!? Just because Oka-chan dumped him and he's alone now!? If that's the case, I, I, I... arrrghhh! I will put such thoughts aside, now.

"Is that so?"

"...In particular, I,"

In particular, just because I was worried about you, don't misunderstand! Hmph! For some reason behind Kouko, Two Dimensions was using a template to add a soundtrack for it all, but for the moment she ignored it.

"Ka-ga-san"

"..."

Asked by Banri if she would listen once more, nicely, "Yes...," Kouko nodded meekly. She suddenly seemed to have become a timid little girl, hiding herself half behind Banri's shoulder. Seeing Kouko like that, Mitsuo took a breath also. He sighed, looking as if both his breath and his energy were leaving him, almost as if it had been his cheeks that had taken offense.

"Kaga-san, if you want to be part of today's drinking party, then please don't fight with your shoes. Will you please take part nicely, having fun for Yana-ssan's sake? If you can, then it's OK for you to be with us."

"...Understood"

"You too, Yana-ssan. Are you good with that?"

"...Yep."

While answering curtly, Mitsuo stepped to the side, closer to Two Dimensions. He muttered, "Sorry for boring you," so softly that not even Banri heard. Two Dimensions laughed softly and started walking towards Banri's room.

Banri held Kouko's hand casually as Mitsuo and Two Dimensions entered ahead of them like customary guests. He really could get used to doing this, it seemed to him. He was convinced such feelings came to him because he believed in Kaga-san. Because he believed that her being kind to Mitsuo wasn't because of lingering affections. As if wrapping her slender fingers, they walked shoulder to shoulder. But Kouko, shaking that hand loose,

"..."

Whoosh...

Pretending not to notice, and still not saying anything, he took her hand back as fast as he could, entwining their fingers deeply, to the point where their palms were glued together. They always laughed together when holding hands, calling it the "Vacuum-packed grip~" and "Proof of the super lovey-dovey~." For some reason, they'd chosen to use the old Doraemon voice on such occasions. Kouko did the best she could, but couldn't quite match the remembered "Nobuyo Voice," and Banri chuckled. As if not to raise her voice either, Kouko looked down and just laughed inside her throat.

"Hey you guys, aren't you awfully close!? You have to take into consideration Yana-ssan's broken heart!"

Noticed by Two Dimensions in the elevator, they moved apart quickly, as if they had been forced apart by a karate chop.

"It's OK, it's OK..."

Mitsuo was alone by the wall, trying to hold his left hand with his right, as if vacuum-packed.

"I'm quite the expert at being alone... look, like this even..."

"I have some surprising news for you, Kaga-san."

"Whaat?"

Taking off her gladiators in the entranceway, the Kouko asking back was suddenly four inches shorter. She put on slippers, of a splendid pink rose design, especially for her use. From Olympic, 980 yen.

"Though I only just found out about my neighbor too. That was NANA-senpai's place."

"Eh!?"

Of course none of the guys had anything like slippers, not even Banri the head of house. Mitsuo went straight for the refrigerator, saying, "I'm getting the ice!" and Two Dimensions went straight for the facilities, saying, "I'm borrowing the bathroom!" All of them were barefoot apart from socks.

"She was that strange person the other day. Remember? We'd gotten into the elevator, and we were wondering who was that person all in black. That was NANA-senpai."

"Are you kidding!? That was somebody entirely different!"

Kouko's expression one of complete surprise, she looked over at the wall behind the kitchen. So, it seemed that person lived on the other side of that wall.

"It was a really big surprise. But it seems that NANA-senpai realized a long time ago that a new student in the same university was living next door to her. So it seems that time she invited us to the live show..."

"Ba, Banri~~~..."

Because the bathroom was separated from them by only the door, Two Dimensions' sorrowful voice echoed painfully indeed.

"A little background music, please~~~..."

Hearing that, Banri grabbed the television remote and hit the ‘on' button. He raised the volume a bit. It was a rule in the small apartment when visitors used the bathroom.

The room was still as he'd left it when he took off because of Kouko's phone call.

The floor that Linda had walked on in her socks, the window glass she had placed her forehead

against. The rug Linda had sat upon. Everything was still as it had become at the time Banri had cried before Linda's eyes.

The picture of Banri and Linda was still on the table where he'd left it. It was there face down, and nobody had seen it yet. Banri grabbed it casually, and instead of putting it on the bookshelf, he put it into the middle of a cheap set of shelves.

Then, so they would get some ventilation from the two windows, he opened both of them wide. Kouko didn't notice anything, staring strangely at the wall adjoining the next apartment.

"I wonder, has 'NANA-senpai' said her family name?"

"Who knows? She hasn't put up a nameplate. But we have established that she's from Warabi."

Eeehhh... while nodding strangely seriously, Kouko went to take the plastic grocery bag which Two Dimensions left on the floor to the kitchen. Hurriedly reaching out, Banri lifted the heavy bag.

"This is a side-dish that Two Dimensions bought in his home town. He said it was croquettes, menchi and potato salad. If I had known we were doing a drinking party, then I'd've bought a few things too."

"Now now. Wow, it's still warm. What's more, it smells really good... dangerous, that aura of overweight scratching its way out."

"Tada-kun, what did you two buy?"

"Well, we bought sake, a few snacks and some side-dishes. Macaroni salad, karaage, (wow!) mayonnaise and some heavenly fried foods... and then what? Hey, Yana-ssan!"

Mitsuo pulled his head out of the refrigerator,

"A selection of pickles, sausages and fried rice. Oh, and because Kouko's part of the head-count too..."

Though he was answering, Kouko said "You knew, in other words."

"Great. No veggies at all. I've felt like veggies all along, but don't see anything."

"Huh? Of course there's veggies. Potato salad, macaroni salad, pickles. I mean, Banri, would it be okay to take some of this, like the Ajipon, out for a while? As it is, things won't fit. Don't you want to cool down the sake?"

Mitsuo pulled out some containers of seasoning and stuffed the cans of sake in to the space that opened up. Banri lifted up the one bag left in the kitchen,

"Though I thought that for the moment, this area was my job. Not even you should be in here."

Kouko cast a quick glance at the contents.

They'd bought cans of shochu highball, cocktails, along with beer, ginger ale, alcohol-free cocktail style juices and beer-like drinks.

"Oh my..."

"I was simply annoyed the other day. Saying, can't they just hurry up? There was a good stock of teas and such."

Kouko shrugged her shoulders, looking just a little bored, her killingly cute eyes turned up.

"...But, just a little is okay, right? Just one mouthful. Just the first cup. ...Just one can. Can't I? For Mitsuo's sake? Look, isn't the most important thing about a drinking party a lively atmosphere!?"

She glued herself to Banri.

"Besides, even if I don't get drunk, I'm the type of person who can get excited quickly if there is a need."

"I'm not~!"

"Leaving that aside, was that talk about 'butt chin' for real?"

Very much so. About to sit down by her and rub the front of her lovely tapered chin with his finger, she made ready to escape at once. Lightly seating herself on her favorite stool, she said "Everybody's chin is cleft. Because that's where the left and right sides of the jaw join together," and showed her cheeks. Banri laughed, and took down all the glasses he had from the kitchen shelf.

"Haa... finally! That was good!"

Two Dimensions came out of the bathroom, his expression carefree, wiping his glasses with the hem of his clothing.

"Well then! Speak of the devil, I got a text from Oka-chan! The contents had to do with Yana-ssan! My bowel movements are in excellent condition!"

Proud of himself, he situated himself on Banri's bed. He turned towards Mitsuo enthusiastically.

"Wh, what kind!?"

"Do you want to know, Yana-san?"

"I want to know!"

"It was moderately moist, had lots of volume, and is yet in some ways aromatic."

"Not that. I want to know what the text says!"

"You wonder."

He put his glasses back on. Ignoring Kouko asking "Two Dimensions sends texts from the bathroom...?" with doubtful voice and a funny look on her face,

"'That last call I made was because I was worried about Yana.'"

With an awful sounding falsetto (he was probably trying to imitate Chinami's voice) he started to read the contents of the text message. By that voice alone, Banri, Kouko and Mitsuo were rooted there and,

"'Did you see Yana around this afternoon? Though we're taking third period together he didn't come to the lecture, and though I marked the attendance list for him, I was concerned that perhaps he was having some problem or other. Sorry, that was all I wanted to ask. Things being as they are, it's difficult to get ahold of Yana. Catch you later!' There're three hand-marks. ...Looks like that's it."

"Sorry Oka-chan, I've made your text public," Two Dimensions looked into space and put his hands together.

Mitsuo, apparently lost somewhere deep in thought, had stopped moving. Banri casually closed the open refrigerator door.

"Ooh my..."

Said Kouko.

"She went so far as to call out for him, no, she's hung out for Mitsuo's sake. Ultrasonic went so far as to mark the attendance list for him. She dumped him, but then did something nice for him."

That's a devil's trick, isn't it? Perfect. Saying that, sitting on the stool and swinging her legs still, she watched Mitsuo without moving, her eyes slightly malicious.

"Naturally, you're going to ignore her, right?"

"..."

"Talking to her, meeting with her, isn't it no use already? If that's the case, then you just ignore such things. You ignore her forever, having nothing to do with her for eternity. Isn't that how it

is?"

"M, me...!"

Mitsuo squared his shoulders and turned towards Kouko's white face, but his forced expression only looked depressed. Breathing in, gasping a bit even, brushing his hair up,

"Me, ...m, e..."

Who knew where the energy he had while fighting Kouko earlier had gone? His face was just like that of a nervous little kid. As it was, he was mumbling and stuttering.

Seeing him in such a state, in the end Kouko heaved a great sigh. And then, getting up from her stool and saying "lend me" she snatched the iPhone from Two Dimension's hand. Slipping her fingertip to her ear, she ignored Banri's "what the heck?"

"...Hello, it's me. Because Two Dimensions and Mitsuo are here at Tada-kun's place to drink, you're coming too. Though I didn't want you to come, for Mitsuo's sake I'm reluctantly calling you, Mitsuo's feeling down and he's whining! ...Huh!? What do you mean, shut up! Questions aren't allowed! Yes!? I don't know, so just shut up and listen! The address, ..."

There was a callback at the speed of lightning. Certainly so high-handed it could penetrate the heavens,

"If you don't come, that's fine! But I don't think Mitsuo would like that! Hmph!"

Take that! She hung up. Returning the iPhone to Two Dimensions with a smile and a thank-you,

"Good grief, how troublesome can you be?"

She turned to Mitsuo the face of a cold-hearted childhood friend. Banri fled to the kitchen, apparently not happy with things,

"And aga~in I wound up being nice for Mitsuo's sake~. Recharge~"

Phew... Tilting her head like a swan, she pressed her cheek to Banri's shoulder. Oh, it's all right, Banri automatically stroked her back.

"...Why, that... what were you doing, calling Chinami!?"

At last, with the blood vessels in his head about to burst and his eyes burning brightly, Mitsuo drew near, shuffling on his knees and sputtering while shouting out at Kouko. Kouko, entirely like a pet cat, breaking away from Banri,

"Be quiet, you're making a scene. You seem like a neighborhood nuisance. Besides, the neighbor is somebody we know. Take that into consideration. What would you rather I do? Your saying

'Me, me,' I couldn't tell quite what you wanted to say. I don't have the spare time to hang around and decipher your shouting, even life isn't long enough for that. The same is true for Tada-kun. And Two Dimensions, even. Whether Ultrasonic comes or not is a good question though, but for now, I called. If you want to go home, why don't you?"

Mitsuo was listening to all that with a terrible look on his face. As if frozen into a kneeling pose, he wasn't moving nor even breathing.

Tugging casually but firmly at the hem of his clothing, Banri spoke.

"Like Kaga-san said, you can go back too. You can go back to spending your days awkwardly killing time. Or you can stay here and stand a chance of fixing things."

"..."

Slowly, Mitsuo looked at Banri's face. He was deciding if he wanted to do what Banri said.

"Kaga-san's way of doing things is a bit rough, but, well, shall we call it 'strong medicine'? You could ask, 'Will you live, or will you die?'"

In a corner of his mind, a strange thought occurred to him. He realized that he'd seen somebody giving such strong medicine recently. For Mitsuo's sake, Kouko had made a quick call to Chinami. For Linda's sake, NANA-senpai made a false phone call to Banri. Those two were entirely different, but still,

And then himself, well, whatever.

"Does it seem that my staying here is for Yana-ssan's sake?"

Although he could not use the strong medicine as with those two, then he could at least give out careful doses of something like herbal medicine. Because he thought so, he tried to say it like he was happy about it.

Mitsuo, looking very embarrassed, looked at Banri but before long took a breath and stood up. Saying "Hold on," Banri quickly rose and tried to follow him, but Mitsuo didn't turn towards the door.

He stood in the kitchen and washed his hands roughly, as if he were angry. Then turning around,

"...These sausages, can they be boiled?"

* * *

At around seven-thirty, he got a phone call in a teary voice, "Banri~, come here~."

"You left the main street at the pet shop? Oh that's it, you're turned around. We're exactly the opposite direction from the station. I guess there's a convenience store? You understand? I'll go right out to meet you, so just wait."

Once he hung up,

"Was that Chinami just now...? She made it close to here?"

Mitsuo was practically trembling as he asked him. Answering yes! Banri stuffed his cell-phone and the key to his place in his pockets and stood up.

Having decided to stay here, Mitsuo was obviously still nervous. He'd hardly touched the side-dishes, and had been drinking only sake for some time now. Drunkenly relaxed, his face was paler than usual. It looked like it was due more to the stress than to the alcohol.

It was from here to the next thing, but, not even Banri could save the day. He wouldn't be able to do it by himself.

"It looks like Oka-chan has gotten lost. I've got to go out and bring her back. And while I'm at it, is there anything I should pick up?"

"Sake... more sake sake sake," said Mitsuo. "Carbs! Stomach stuffers!" said Two Dimensions. Kouko said, "Well, if Ultrasonic's going to be making noise, then packing tape and some rope," and such, looking over the table as she spoke.

"Kaga-san, let's go together."

"I'm going!"

When he reached out to her, she smiled at once. Bouncing up to her feet, slinging her little bag over her shoulder, she followed behind Banri to the door.

"Ho, ho, hold on! Banri! What should I do!? What am I going to do with this horrible, awful tension? How will I handle the wait!?"

"You should be fine if you go easy on the potato salad."

"Potato salad!? Two Dimensions just finished eating it all!"

"U...?"

Two Dimensions looked back at Mitsuo, his mouth stuffed with the last of the potato salad.

"Sh, shall I show you...?"

"That's okay! Ah, you don't need to show me the inside of your mouth, idiot! Aan, aa~n! Now there's no more potato salad, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do!"

Scratch what was said before. As one might expect, he'd gotten drunk enough already. He rolled around the carpet on his back, throwing himself about violently like a turtle throwing a tantrum, and began to ram his head into Two Dimension's butt.

With a stunned expression, Kouko took off the gladiators she had just put on.

"He seems to be dying already. Hold on a moment, Tada-kun."

Wondering what she was going back to do,

"Mitsuo. Because I can't just look at more grief, I'm going to specially lend you this."

From her own hair, carefully disarranging her hair by hand, she extracted a sparkling rhinestone-studded hair-band.

"The power of the hair-band is incredible. This, by itself, flips the switch. In a wave of power, your whole body goes into GOGO mode. A wimp leaps up and turns into his very strongest self. Beautiful and tough, I turn into my perfect self. But pierced earrings would be rather difficult, don't you think? If you have the chance, then a necklace too. Putting on too many things thoughtlessly, without style and without preparation is no good. That's all you need keep in mind."

She held it reverently in her hands, as if it were a queen's tiara. Then, squatting down and reaching over her fallen childhood friend,

"Okay? The moment you put it on, you will become perfect. You won't be something scary. And so, this evening, who will be more beautiful and tough than any other? Mitsuo will be."

She stuck it into his puffed up no-charge perm as if to hold his hair back from his forehead.

"M, me...?"

"Yes, for you. ...Look! It suits you! Doesn't it!?"

"It suits you! It does!" Banri and Two Dimensions also applauded in unison with Kouko. The sparkling hair band raised his bangs, like a young girl, or perhaps like some guy in a gaudy fashion from days gone by. Mitsuo still stared blankly in amazement, his white forehead shining smoothly.

"Am I... perfect?"

Putting his hand to his chest, he tried to make a beaming expression.

Laughing from having seen that, Banri and Kouko left the room. Seeing them off with a wave, Two Dimensions called out "Take care!"

Taking the elevator down to the first floor, the two of them pushed open the heavy door. Stepping out the next instant,

"Wow!"

Banri's voice rose automatically.

The outdoor evening was astonishingly warm and humid, wringing wet. As if the moisture were descending upon them, it was perfectly windless. It wasn't all that hot, but in any case the humidity was awfully high. It seemed that if he stood still, drops of water would stick to him.

"What is with this, this awful clammy feeling... it hurts to breathe!"

"It's already the wet season. Isn't it going to rain these coming days? It's good for me to be around places like this though, since my skin's dry. Now, where was Supersonic going to be?"

"She said she would be standing by the pet shop at Sunkus . ...Wow, it's not even summer. If it's this wet now, how's Tokyo going to wind up? I don't like it when I sweat so much."

"Summer around here is awful, to a level that is truly life threatening. But we'll get through it. With a Grande Frappuchino."

"Better than that, let's go to the sea. Or the pool."

Or the river, which he realized that of course he couldn't say. Very much so. How was he going to speak of playing casually in the place he'd nearly died? Even though he couldn't remember it. Kouko smiled openly and innocently.

"No way, I absolutely want to go! To the sea with Tada-kun! That or the pool! What shall we do, it'll be so fun! Let it get hot soon!"

Kouko looked up at the sky comically as if giving it orders, and Banri laughed.

"I mean, just why would Ultrasonic be in such a place? The pet shop isn't just the other side of the station. Couldn't she look it up on a map?"

The two walked out under the streetlights. Kouko's high-heels sounded, clack clack.

There were lots of people coming and going in the neighborhood. Ladies in suits looking like

they were coming home from work, women with bags of stuff they'd bought, parents with children too, and there were kids still wandering about in their school uniforms. They continued on to the station, and when they entered the shopping district there were yet more and more people about.

"Do you think she didn't hear you well when you gave her the address? But Oka-chan heard those people she invited to the party quite good."

Saying "I'm not bad," he shrugged and taking Kouko's hand, they walked as if they were crashing into a flowing wave of humanity. As they walked hand in hand like that, Banri remembered what Mitsuo had said.

Though for me Chinami is the 'only one', to Chinami I am just 'one of them.' A fellow not worth worrying about. Slow, hesitant.

"...Something for a fellow not worth worrying about, being called out specially, all of a sudden, and not showing up."

Banri thought that way and yet.

"Would she come out for anybody's sake? She's a charitable soul. 'Ultrasonic' doesn't seem to like him that way. It's more like a love of humanity. Kind of like 'Ecology, Love and Peace!'"

While he laughed a little at Kouko's manner of speaking, he looked sidelong at her. Because of her heels, there was hardly any difference in their height, and they were practically on the same line of sight. When they talked about Chinami, she always seemed to be pouting, a lovely woman with a ill-tempered look in her eyes.

Banri said, "Though I don't think it's like that. As for me, I think that because Oka-chan, as might be expected, has some special feelings regarding Yana-ssan, she is paying plenty of attention. Even in dumping him like that, that time. Besides, for who's sake would she be saving her strength?"

"Maybe she does it with that mysterious vitality of hers. They say Ultrasonic isn't unusually powerful. She seems to have about 500 million times my strength! But doing such things for other people's sake is impossible for me of course. I have my hands full with just loving you."

"Is that true?"

"True, true, absolutely true."

"And despite all that you were nice to Yana-ssan. You even crowned him with your life-giving GOGO-item hair-band."

At those words, spoken in a joking manner, Kouko blurted "Eh?" and whirled towards Banri, her eyes wide.

"But, that isn't what you said, Tada-kun! You said 'it's okay to be nice to Yana-ssan so he stays at the drinking party!'"

Of course he remembered it. But he didn't say it all that seriously. ...Well, maybe just a little nuanced, some seriousness mixed in, and yet. Anyhow, the surprise on Kouko's face was adorable,

"Maybe it made me a little jealous."

What kind of thing was he trying to say?

"Eh, eh, eh! No way, no way! There's no way you got jealous! That was never my intention!"

"But a man's heart is a complicated thing... even when his head understands, his feelings can easily be..."

"Tada-kun~!"

"My heart... has been wounded..."

"Sorry, sorry, I said I'm sorry!"

Kouko tried to walk quickly, and while clinging desperately to Banri's arm she blinked her long eyelashes and looked up at him.

"If you'll forgive me, I'll do anything~!"

"Well then, let me verify your butt-chin."

She obediently stuck out her chin. When he touched it with the widest part of his thumb, Kouko's elegantly tapered chin really was distinctly divided.

"Whoa... it really is split...!"

"Are you done with that?"

"Not yet! How did Yana-ssan come to know about this mysterious butt-chin!? Spit it out!"

He moved up right to the tip of her nose, but Kouko still didn't resist, looking very sorrowful,

"All the kids we associated with knew. Because in my second year of high school suspicions of plastic surgery arose, and in order to prove I hadn't done anything I let everybody touch my nose and chin..."

And so on she talked. When he tried to imagine 'Kaga Kouko's face being touched like crazy' it got just too funny, and Banri unconsciously burst out laughing. Bursting out here and there all

over her face,

"...Hey! Enough! I'm getting mad!"

This time Kouko moved quickly and stepped out in front of Banri. "But I was joking!" "I can't hear you!" "Sorry!" "You're not forgiven!" "Did you have plastic surgery!?" "No, I didn't!" ...of course in the end the two laughed together loudly as they slipped through the gaps in the crowd. They walked quickly as if racing each other, hands entwined together, then apart, bumping into people and then clinging together again.

While they were playing around they passed through the station, heading towards the convenience store where Chinami was supposed to be waiting.

From Banri's place, it must have been about fifteen minutes. Leaving the main street and going down some streets that were getting dark and lonely, there was their landmark, a suspicious-looking pet shop amongst some random stores.

He thought she would be inside reading some magazine, but Chinami was standing out front. Banri called out to her, but she didn't raise her downcast face. White earphone cords could be seen at the corners of her hair, and it looked like she was listening to music.

About to call out once more, Banri hesitated.

She didn't seem the cute female friend with the anime voice, Oka-chan, but rather she seemed like some girl he didn't know. Words failed him. She could have been somebody from another country.

The full, long black hair spilling down, the white profile was looking at nothing in particular. She didn't even look up and call back to him. Her black all-in-one dress blended into the night street entirely. Her handbag had rows of beads stuck on it. On her delicate ankles were simple sandals. From her short sleeves stretched slender arms. Casting no shadow she stood in the night street, her body more than ever seemed broken, and an uneasy feeling came over him.

Her figure appeared on the verge of disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Having a feeling that he shouldn't recklessly intrude, Banri instinctively froze in place, but,

"Hey you!"

"...Whoa"

It was Kaga Kouko's way, of course.

Not even noticing Banri's hesitation, she'd quickly closed on Chinami in her high-heels and sharply pulled out her ear-phones. Chinami lifted her surprised (that *would* be surprising) face,

"You, you surprised me, I hadn't noticed...! Even you came out to greet me? Sorry, and thanks."

That voice, her normal anime-voice. It was the same old Chinami.

She laughed, and when he focused on her, he saw that around her eyes and cheeks, her skin was like a baby's: transparent, pale and soft. But her eyes flitted here and there evasively, her attitude fathomless.

"We're sorry too, Oka-chan. It would have been better to have met you at the station from the start. Don't you think it was rather pointless to have walked so much?"

"No big deal. I mean, I had simply spaced out. Though I had no idea where I was going, I just kept walking."

Chinami, putting her full black hair over her left shoulder, tilted her head slightly to one side. In the dark it was too white, her slim neck. Having looked a little nervously, Banri averted his eyes in a hurry. Just by not wearing her normal guru-like weeds, Chinami looked so strangely feminine. She was excessively child-like, with hearing her saccharine anime voice as the icing on the cake.

"Were, were you at home?"

"Yep. And then suddenly the phone rang. Oh no, I thought. It's Yana, I thought. At first I said 'I can't!' ...he was pretty upset after all. I was too. So look at what I brought!"

Opening her bag, Chinami showed the contents to Banri and Kouko. Banri reached out to take it without thinking,

"Now I get it... this was shaking."

They took a good look at it. They were two bags of store-bought seimen noodles, with only "Chinese Noodles" written on them. Looking like they had been grabbed straight from the refrigerator, they still had cool drops of water stuck to them. When she said "Yes!" to the drinking party, it was probably all she had, so it couldn't be helped.

"Two Dimensions might like them. He said he'd like something like noodles."

Kouko took one bag too, and smiled cooly. Then, as if remembering something,

"Oh yeah, what's with you?"

She went straight up to Chinami's face. One eyebrow raised and her mouth still a chilly smile, her scowling look was a pile of poison thorns.

"No satisfied with just playing around with Mitsuo's heart, you're going to wrap your wet, slimy

tentacles around Two Dimensions this time? Just how dark are you? In your greed, of course, I'm the big picture too!"

"Eh? Wh, what?"

"Didn't you call him? Two Dimensions? Do I have to spell it out to you?"

"Why, why? He said it was okay for me to call him! And I was worried about Yana! Besides, wouldn't you get mad if I called Banri?"

"Naturally! I'd get angry, or rather impossible! So impossible, it would take you back into your past to where even your birth would have been cancelled!"

Suddenly Chinami, turning to face Banri,

"I knew it~, Banri and Kaga-san are going out together! I saw you, you were holding hands really tight."

She pointed at them with both hands.

"Ah, you've seen us!?"

"Of course I've seen you!"

Banri let his face fall and laughed, but Kouko still glared cooly at Chinami, not moving one inch. Her arms folded and clasping a bag of noodles, her chin jutted out, her beautiful face like that of a demon.

"I mean, I'm going to spell it out clearly for you now. You, as far as Mitsuo is concerned, are ve-ry harmful. I can't even imagine how much Mitsuo was wounded, troubled and has suffered because of you. Mitsuo is not the same as people like you. He's innocent, not knowing the ways of the world. From now on, don't you go around poking at him playfully. What for you is a playful shove, for Mitsuo may quite possibly be a fatal blow. Mitsuo is overwhelmed, but he is trying with all his might to get back on his feet. From now on, you will swear to not give him ideas. Here and now. From now on, don't torment him. If you cannot do that, then of course don't come around. I really don't want to see you having anything to do with Mitsuo again."

"Swear?"

Her head slightly tilted, Chinami looked back at Kouko's eyes.

"Swear to you? Why? I don't have anything to do with you."

As if taken by surprise, Kouko held her tongue.

Banri gasped a little too. The Chinami they'd known, if Kouko ever said anything to her, would

just laugh as if embarrassed.

"What I think about Yana, what Yana thinks about me, what might happen between us, it has nothing to do with you. First of all, aren't you and Banri dating each other? What do you get out of paying attention to it? If I were Banri, I'd feel pretty bad about such comments. If I were thinking about being forgiven for something, wouldn't that make for misunderstandings from the very start? Don't concern yourselves with other people's business."

Illuminated by the convenience store sign, Chinami's white face didn't seem angry. Making the same pretty face as ever, her dark eyes shining, she remained unruffled. Unruffled, she threw strong words at them. As if she were casting even the pebbles beneath their feet at them.

And then,

"I swear. Let's go back."

Turning towards Kouko and Banri, who had gone still, she opened her bag and drew closer to them. But at that moment, opened too widely perhaps, from the bag came the sound of both sides tearing,

"Whaa!?"

It fell at Chinami's feet. All that was left in her hands were the handle-straps. It happened in an instant, as if it were part of a sketch, in that moment it fell a crunching sound reached even Banri's ears.

Chinami hurriedly crouched down, checking inside her bag. Pulling out a pouch, opening the fastener,

"...Are you kidding!? I stuffed it into a bag like this~ of all things... man~...!"

As things were, she was greatly troubled.

Stuffed inside the pouch was Chinami's treasure: a small handicam. The Oka Chinami Camera, or O-Camera for short. Bought with money she's managed to save from a part-time job, she'd been showing it off at the drinking party the other day.

"That didn't sound too good... can you turn it on? Shouldn't you check?"

Though Banri spoke timidly, Chinami nodded and pushed the power button on the O-Camera. A little red light turned on, and peeking through the viewfinder,

"It's okay... It looks like it wasn't broken. Perhaps we should record something... what do you think?"

Chinami stood up, and immediately turned the lens on Banri. A ham, he waved his hand

automatically. Not wasting any time, he pretended he was an Olympic athlete munching on one of the bags of Chinese noodles. Moving the lens to the side, she next focused on Kouko. Kouko, perhaps still in shock from Chinami's counterattack and not yet recovered, stood there quietly in the street.

"This is Kaga-san. Kaga Kouko. This is her first time O-Camera. Hi there!"

"..."

While it recorded, Kouko, naturally, ignored the chatting Chinami and turned away from her, but Chinami kept the lens pointed at her. With the lens plainly functioning as her eye, it was as if she were still staring straight at her.

"Hey, Kaga-san. It hurts me too. Though perhaps you can't see it. But, so it is, so it is, really. Really. You see, because, for Yana,"

Suddenly, her voice got interrupted.

Chinami was still posed, ready to record, though Banri had noticed her shoulder trembling. Taking little breaths, Chinami seemed to be trying to stop the trembling. But, as you might expect, unable to endure,

"Twice already I've called out her, is she going to speak...?"

She lowered the hand holding the camera. Her white face crumpling, her big eyes suddenly filling, Banri stepped towards her with a groan.

Oka-chan was crying...

"Don't."

"..."

---Plop!

It was Kouko.

She pushed the bag of Chinese noodles she had in her hand into Chinami's face as hard as she could.

"Enough of this crying so cute and behaving like a little kid in front of Tada-kun, in this world only I can do that. Only by your stopping crying will I know that you understand."

Pressing the back of her head with one hand, she pushed the noodles with the other. She put so much force into it, it was like a human modan-yaki. In the end, sorrowful noises were coming out from beneath the noodles.

"Ka, Kaga-san... You're suffocating Oka-chan!"

"...Have you stopped crying?"

"Fugu...gu...fufufu...nffu...!"

Kouko checked how things were going, making sure Banri could not see. And then, shaking her head from side to side "not good", she pushed firmly on the noodles once more.

"Looks like she needs more."

"You mean that, even though she really looks in sad shape...!?"

She was trying to free herself somehow from the modan-yaki, but Chinami,

"Hey, hey... Banri... Banri..."

In spite of her difficulty breathing, she was calling Banri. She was still made into a "face-mein" by Kouko. All she had in her hands was the camera in one, the bag strap in the other. And then,

"I look rather funny right now, don't I?"

Record it... try and record it... she was asking. She extended the camera out to Banri. So I can see this mess later on, she said.

"Oka-chan, really!?"

"...Re, really..."

Banri had no choice but to take the camera and follow Chinami's instructions, and do what remained to be done to record this strange face-mein affair. With the simple controls, he shortly knew how to use even the zoom. When he waved the camera in Kouko's direction, the lens faced a posed smile. She gave him a little wink back. A salaryman who happened to pass by turned his face away in open annoyance, then escaped crossing to the other side of the street at a trot. A group of elementary school kids returning from cram school and going to the convenience store waved their hands for the camera, but other children were restraining them, saying "Shh." For the moment, he was left to record even such responses from the world around them.

Before long Chinami,

"Hey, could you let go your hand just a little, Kaga-san...? Somehow I'm feeling it's pretty stable."

Slowly, the noodles placed on her face still, she set out walking by herself. It seemed that because they had been pushed on so hard, the noodles were sticking tightly to the curves of her face and not falling. While recording video of that bag stuck there, leaving nothing out, Banri

found it simply too surreal. Was it all right to laugh, or should he not? Really, it was as if he were seeing noodles with swaying long hair, walking around.

"Shall I call it a face... or a mask, or noodles?"

Banri said, "The letter is for *mein*, or noodles, right?" but Chinami,

"Masquerade".

She suddenly started to dance, moving only her hips so that the noodles on her face wouldn't fall. The bag simply too idiotic looking, Kouko suddenly lost it. In seeming annoyance, she hid her mouth, but she burst out laughing anyway. Chinami too, as if she couldn't stand it anymore, broke out laughing "Fufu...fufufu hahaha! What am I doing!?" and finally dropping the noodles,

"No, seriously, how would that be for an entrance!? Then with Yana there too, perhaps we can concern ourselves with forgiving and forgetting."

She was rubbing around her eyes as she picked up the bag. Hiding even the traces of her tears, the night fairy tried to laugh with her normal soft face.

"That, of course, is too foolish, and he might get offended," they said, squelching that idea. With that, the three of them turned towards Banri's place, and yet,

"John..."

"Yoko..."

There was an excess of foolishness over face-mein, but back in the room they were waiting naked.

The hair-band power-up equipped Mitsuo, along with Two Dimensions, were sleeping unclothed, cuddled up in Banri's bed. Two Dimensions, with his glasses, for the moment looked like John. The manly Mitsuo was snuggled under his arm. They had been in this position the whole while, waiting for Banri & Kouko to bring Chinami back to the room. Arguing between the two over whether they were coming or not.

His bed contaminated by the naked pair of bums, Banri blew. Their eyes contaminated, Kouko and Chinami blew. Reading the mood, Two Dimensions quickly got up, said "Well, we can start the drinking party over... this time with Oka-chan here too..." and got dressed.

"Well... Chinami... would laugh at it... we, thought..."

Mitsuo, the hair-band still in place, looked up at Chinami awkwardly. Chinami slowly shook her head from side to side,

"Yana, that wasn't funny at all. It was just plain disgusting."

Cut in half by a single stroke. While turning her face away in disgust, Kouko said so to Chinami so softly that not even Banri heard.

"Face-mein took the prize."

"Fuhahahahaa!" Chinami raised a victory laugh by herself. Mitsuo kept looking up at her in wonder. "Ah, it's gotta be some kind of noodle," Two Dimensions grabbed the Chinese noodles, and Banri washed his hands in the sink.

Since it plainly seemed that nothing had happened, they could restart the drinking party.

* * *

Banri tried as hard as he could to open his eyes, and it occurred to him, after I've fallen asleep, why wasn't something fun keeping me awake?

In any case, there wasn't any sake to drink. It's okay if you don't wake up until morning, he thought.

But how many hours they'd talked like crazy about foolish things, and gorged themselves on the side dishes they'd perhaps bought too much of,

"...Eh...?"

And in the end, it seemed he'd fallen asleep without realizing it.

Two Dimensions and Mitsuo were muttering things like "Five dimensions seem incredible" and "The concept of the universe is greater than its substance," with the strange mood characteristic of the middle night, and though they were talking up a storm, and he should have been taking part, had he fallen out naturally?

Slowly raising his body, waking up was like a continuation of his dreams. He looked around the dark room, lit by the first little traces of light. Two Dimensions called this lighting condition "the crack of dawn." "Let's turn on the lights at the crack of dawn," he'd said. Whether that was what it was called around Shitamachi, or it was peculiar to the language, in either case it seemed to have a oddly nice flavor, and Banri decided to call it 'the crack of dawn' next time.

Banri was half off the futon spread on the floor, apparently disarranged by him rolling around. Mitsuo had fallen asleep right in the middle of the futon, a towel-blanket over his head. Two Dimensions was pathetic, his body curled up under the table, looking cold, a light snoring noise rising from him.

Chinami was sleeping in the bed with Kouko.

She had fallen asleep first, with Kouko, who was frantically moaning in her sleep "Don't drop the makeup... We can't go to buy makeup we've lost..." When they went to sleep, at least, they were looking pretty good. They were peacefully sleeping, sharing a pillow, Kouko turned sideways towards the wall, hugging the petite Chinami from behind as if she were a plush toy. Breathing in unison in their sleep, it was oddly amusing.

Right around ten o'clock, Kouko called home. She lied to them, saying she was staying over at a

college friend named Oka Chinami's house. In order to gain the trust of her doubting parents, who'd asked "You aren't with Tada-kun, are you?" Chinami was put on the telephone and introduced. Eh? I'm not an elementary schooler! Eh? My voice isn't synthesized! Eh? I'm not sniffing helium either! ...And so on, she talked for dear life. Though they weren't sorry, it was funny, and the guy-team was desperately covering their laughter.

He felt sorry for her having lied, but his conscience wasn't bothering him much. He thought, 'We're college students, and this kind of thing is okay.' He thought so because they weren't doing anything "bad." He still couldn't see the lights of Paris. Because keeping a relationship pure is such a rare thing nowadays, doing this much should be forgiveable. Maybe.

Three in the morning.

Alone, Banri absentmindedly rubbed his eyes. "...Shoot," he let out in a small voice.

The quiet room was a horrible mess. Food and sake, and what you might call the aroma of youth, had been swelteringly, hotly brought together.

Getting up softly so as to not make any sound with his feet, carefully stepping around the feet of his friends that had rolled out onto the floor, he turned towards the closet and quietly pulled out some blankets. Used in the springtime, they were things he'd rolled up and stuffed away unwashed in the recent heat, but they didn't smell when he sniffed them. Kneeling quietly, Banri draped the blanket over Two Dimensions.

Doing this so his guest wouldn't get cold, he opened the window to get some ventilation. As he did so, a wind came through. Banri sat down by the window, the cool air of the dead of night pleasant on his throat worm from so much chatter.

He gazed at the bed. Groaning "no..." softly, Kouko buried herself under the blanket. He wondered if she'd gotten a little chilled by the wind. No longer able to see her sleeping face, he was very disappointed.

---Where was the last station of love!?

Their date was an unusual time. While the drunken Chinami threw herself down and munched on dried squid, Mitsuo while doing sit-ups cried out "Marriage!" in answer. "After that perhaps, it'll be habit! It'll be living! It'll be reality!" he said. Two Dimensions said, "Saying that nobody can see the way before him in love, a man takes a trip by train... if it derails, he doesn't arrive at the station... hey, isn't that phrase just now good? I'm going to use it for something," taking note of it at once, he fiddled with his iPhone.

And then Banri and Kouko, their eyes making contact, their voices in unison, said "Paris!"

Concealing their reasons from Chinami's query of "What was that about?" they had paired up, and knowing that if you were looking at it from outside they were annoying to the extreme, had

kept on laughing.

The last station of their love was Paris.

Sleeping under Banri's blanket, the curves of Kouko's figure could be seen dimly.

The obsessive side of himself, impatiently saying 'I want to go to Paris, I want to go soon!' and the side of himself that seemed to be satisfied with simply sitting by the window like this, feeling comfortable listening to Kouko breathing in her sleep forever, both sides of himself certainly existed, it seemed to him.

Well, if it could really happen, he'd prefer it if Kouko were staying alone, though.

He wanted to try and have a bad relationship he couldn't tell his parents about, forsaking everything else in this apartment in Tokyo. Already, he didn't feel that was a lie.

He wondered too, whether the others would tease him for getting close to the eccentric, clingy Kouko, wondering if they were spending time alone together. They would wonder what else was going on. The two of them, murmuring sweet words, drawing close to her lovely face, holding hands without concern about where they were, touching, clinging, because it was all right.

She was probably thinking that no matter what, Tada-kun was safe. We're not in Paris, unfortunately. He would promise that he wouldn't explode, even if she lit the fuse. Banri felt sure of that, as if it had been written in fireworks.

But if he was a firecracker, wouldn't lighting his fuse normally make him explode? It was a mystery, her trust in him.

The soles of his feet feeling strangely hot, he pushed them against the glass.

In the middle of the night like this, a night where all of his friends were sleeping, his girlfriend Kouko was sleeping too, and only he himself was completely and wide awake. Feeling sad and thinking strange thoughts, without anybody to stop him from doing it.

"...Is there..."

He tried to keep his voice down.

"...anybody awake?"

Was there nobody? He asked, rolling to the floor. Alone, he looked up at the dark ceiling.

Was this an after-effect of a fun time, from talking on and on, making lots of noise? His wide-awake head randomly high, he was unable to get back to sleep.

He was unusually intense, as if he had been left behind alone.

Apart from himself, there probably wasn't anybody else in this world waking up at a time like this. It came to him just like that, at that very moment.

From somewhere nearby he could hear the sound of a window sash being opened. Was it from the apartment next door? That was NANA-senpai's, but maybe---

Almost grumbling, rolling and getting up, Banri took his cell-phone off the charger. Thinking it might be a problem at such an hour, but he was strangely sure.

The message he sent was very short. 'Are you awake?' was all it said.

He pushed the send button, and a few seconds passed. Rather than an e-mail, Banri's cell-phone vibrated from an incoming call. Cutting it off after only one ring, Banri, saying 'as I suspected,' stood up.

So there wouldn't be any noise, he went out on the veranda, quietly shutting the door-wall.

Walking barefoot and tip-toe on the cold rough concrete, he leaned his body over the railing and deftly peeked around the easily breakable panel which separated him from the neighboring veranda.

Over there, he saw the person he suspected would be there. As expected, Banri laughed.

"Linda"

As easy as that, he had called out to her.

"Banri"

Not reproaching him for having omitted the honorific, Linda was holding on to the railing in the same poze, looking at Banri and laughing.

What does one do with one's neighbor at three in the morning?

A former class-mate, in a place like this.

The situation was becoming strangely comical, the two of them by turn talking and laughing softly. Linda made as if to press her arm against his mouth, and Banri, his mouth open but no voice coming out, did nothing but laugh.

"Wh, what are you doing!?"

"It's you too!"

Talking softly in voices already hoarse, they pointed at each other. Really, what was it they were doing? Having drunken the high spirits of the night, they were still laughing.

While he laughed, Banri was thinking about something odd. It was okay to talk casually. Rather than calling her Senpai, now it seemed more natural to call her "Linda", he thought.

He felt as if he remembered it always being like that before, but Banri's breath caught. Phew, as if in relief, he realized it was as if a hard tension, stiffening his body everywhere, was coming undone. The night-chilled oxygen diffused through him pleasantly.

"A drinking party?"

While bringing his laughter under control, he nodded to Linda in reply.

"Is NANA-senpai there with you?"

"Yes"

Taking a quick breath, Linda combed up her bangs. As soon as she set it in order with her fingers, the night wind messed it up again.

Looking towards him, her eyes shone brightly.

"What I mean is, I was just now remembering. About you. So when your text arrived, I was really surprised. How did you know I was awake?"

"How did I? I sort of had a hunch."

"The Banri from before was that sort of guy. There were times at training camps, away races and so on. There really were, a few times a year. In the middle of the night, apparently unable to sleep, you came creeping into the girls' room… coming in and saying 'Hey Linda, are you awake?'"

"Hey, I'm not a stalker."

"But that's how it was. You were almost like a stalker. So even though you were looking really awful, you'd nervously say things like 'I can't sleep... maybe it's because of tomorrow's practice race...' To which I would answer, 'How would you like me waking you up? And then, the two of us getting sick during the morning run for lack of sleep.'"

"I suppose I didn't have any male friends?"

"You did, you did. You'd gone to every one of them asking 'Hey, you awake?', and in the end you came over to where I was."

"Oh, in other words you're telling me that I decided to be a stalker after I'd checked to make sure that all the guys were asleep... isn't that your typical premeditated crime!?"

"More like we were just kids. And still quite childish, especially you."

"No, that's not right. I understand my present self. In that behavior, my intentions were absolutely ero. I absolutely was. I, was, guilty."

"Re, really? ...Wow, then maybe, that time I lost my panties, was that really you...?"

"Eh!?"

"Just kidding."

"What's with saying 'I was guilty' in an 'I was gay' sort of way?" Linda was doubling over in laughter. A long time ago, the fiance of a certain famous person in a press conference said such things, and the cruel brats of the time joked about and imitated that way of talking. ---Whether talking such things was bringing back his memories of the past, or it was general information that remained to him, it didn't make a difference to the current Banri.

The sound of her laugh remaining on her lips still, Linda sighed and looked down upon the city.

Banri too looked over towards where Linda was looking.

The night city was strangely quiet, not even the slight wind could be heard. It was just like time had stopped. Since he'd first moved here he'd known how loud this area was at middle-day, flooded with the noises of cars.

ON THE VERANDA AT NIGHT
ゴールデンタイム3
GOLDEN TIME
後期学期末

He joined with Linda, standing side by side on the veranda, separated by the panel.

Oddly, even idly silent like this, he didn't feel uneasy. Rather, it was comfortable. He felt as if he was accepted, and released from all pressure.

It's all right not to talk, even silent still, Linda understood he wasn't thinking anything strange. Everything was okay. It was all right. He could believe that unconditionally. Such things as being understood, angering someone, being disliked did not exist, and he could be at peace.

And so Banri,

"...Something."

Setting himself in the same poze as Linda, he rested his chin in his hands, thinking at his own pace still about what he could say.

"Yes"

"It was for some reason, though."

"What?"

"I think that in those days I loved you. And so that time, using being unable to sleep as an excuse, and seeing it was about time for Linda to be falling asleep... It was rather ero, I think. For that I am sorry."

With a big smile, Linda laughed.

"Is that so?"

Looking at Banri sidelong, Linda's mouth twisted in a strangely evil way. She was laughing scornfully.

"...You never thought that way?"

"Well..."

"...Why does everybody seem to think I'm a bomb ready to go off...?"

That I'm not safe to be around. That nobody knows when I'm going to explode.

At that moment, Banri became aware of an object rising softly before his eyes.

The mysterious object, coaxed onwards by the wind, rose and fell over and over again like a jellyfish dancing underwater, but then went up and without stopping flew away high above.

Would it ever come down to earth again, even on some far, high place?

"What's that? A plastic bag? ...Or what?"

"What? Which one?"

"That one. Look, over there."

Linda leaned out around the panel, and looked out to where Banri was pointing. The two of them, their bodies bent out at the same angle, watched for a while as it went flying higher and higher.

"...It's a plastic bag, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

Though it was becoming impossible to see, they had somehow chased it with their eyes, and soon Banri's shoulder was pressing against Linda's.

He had no idea even why he was thinking things like "If I could be like this, I would be safe."

He could believe without reason that even if all the people of this world were asleep, if Linda was there it would be all right.

Banri didn't even know whether it was the feelings of his current self, thinking of Linda as a guardian angel, or whether it was the memories of his past self, who had spent so much time with Linda.

For now, he simply stayed as he was.

And so they overcame the lonely dead of night, leaving it behind. They waited for the morning. He had surely done like this before now. So he thought.

"You know, it would have been better if we'd talked normally about the old days from the start."

Still looking far away, Linda spoke. She said that close to his ears.

"...Somehow, once you miss the chance to say something, it can quickly turn to poison. Even when you don't speak of such things, but saving them up they turn to harm. As time passes, they become dangerous. However bad they are, it is best to get them said."

About myself, about my friends. Even about today's drinking party. About being with Linda. At each memory, Banri nodded. It really was so. He quite agreed.

Though that was so, not everything can be done so easily and honestly. The thought passed idly through Banri's mind that some things are like poison.

Making sure to look him in the face, Linda let out a great sigh.

"Between us, from now on, there is nothing we cannot talk about. We haven't changed. ...I think it's okay if we think like that. The truth is, nothing has changed. With Tada Banri, Hayashida Nana. We're living, both of us. We're looking at the same sky. That has not changed at all."

Unable to answer, Banri looked back into Linda's eyes.

He wondered if nothing had changed.

Himself here not knowing Linda, living in Tokyo, living by himself in this room. To Banri, it was obvious that things had changed since that time. About the only things that had not changed were their faces. And if one layer of their skin were peeled back, then they'd be nothing more than unrelated, different people.

And still, he wondered if Linda wanted to believe nothing had changed. Banri is Banri, and that time still is, of course he wondered if that was what Linda wanted.

Of course, he wondered if really she just couldn't accept "this self"...

"...Banri?"

Somebody said, "---That's what it looks like."

It was me that existed with Linda.

You weren't there.

"...That's it, isn't it..."

Banri's ears heard what was certainly the sound of a voice. I heard something, he thought. Answering it with something like a groan, Banri slowly closed his eyes.

He wondered how much longer he had to wait for the still distant morning.

"Linda. ...Senpai."

"..."

He pulled away from the shoulder he'd been leaning against. The part of him that had been touching Linda until now, exposed to the wind, was being chilled too much.

Opening his eyes, but the world was still night. In the blackness there were spots of light, city lights.

"Do you want to go back to that time? To that place? Were you thinking you would want to return if you could to that time where I used to be?"

There being no response, their conversation fell silent.

Linda stood by Banri's side, her hand hiding her mouth still, only her eyes facing the dark sky. Silent for the moment, she seemed to be thinking about something.

You can't go back already, eternally--- Banri thought that way. Going back is simply not possible. He had become like this, everything had changed, and you cannot turn back time. Accepting reality, one way or the other casting aside the things you can't do anything about, can't be helped. Though of course he couldn't get it out of his mouth, he thought over and over again "that's the truth."

The words he couldn't say were truly becoming poisonous. And then they were gnawing on his body. It was to blame for the pain in his chest.

He took a breath. About to say something entirely different, Banri opened his mouth and then,

"I, want to go back!"

"...Eh..."

---Shocked, he looked at his hand.

Linda was shocked too. Bending her body as if going stiff, she looked at Banri's hand.

What the heck he said, what he shouted, what he was about to do, he had no idea.

His hand was near Linda's elbow and about to grab it. He realized it hadn't moved yet, aimlessly hanging in the air.

Slowly, he moved his fingers. He brought them close to check them. Without a doubt, that was his hand. Though it was his own hand, and though it was his own voice,

"...What... did I just say...?"

What he was doing, he really had no idea. He saw Linda's jaw quiver for an instant. The panel that separated their two verandas felt cold against their hips.

Shortly Linda,

"Wow..."

She said. Eyes blinking in surprise, she looked back at Banri, looking surprised from the bottom

of her heart.

"You fell asleep? Just now."

"...Fell asleep...?"

It's gotta be, she nodded and laughed. And pushing hard against the handrail getting herself up,

"We probably both need to get to bed already. Lack of sleep isn't good for you. You'll become oversensitive, and even think things you shouldn't. So they say."

She waved her hand and turned away.

"Good night. Tada Banri."

Cheerfully closing the door-wall to NANA-senpai's residence, Linda quickly returned inside the room. Left behind, Banri was still in a daze.

Fell asleep?

Unconvinced, unable to agree entirely, he still couldn't go back into his apartment. Stepping into the silent world of those sleepers, he couldn't settle down and close his eyes.

I am alone in the soundless night, he thought. I am the only one wide awake right now.

Chapter 4

41

It seemed like Kouko had ended up catching a cold after the drinking party in Banri's room.

On the morning following the day everyone had slept over, at 7 A.M., with all the guys still asleep, snoring, Banri was woken up by Chinami.

He remembered Chinami shaking his shoulder while he was still in a half-dreaming state, opening his eyes to see her squatting beside him and peering into his sleeping face, who then said, "Kaga-san and I will be going back first", to which Banri nodded and murmured incoherently something along the lines of messaging Kouko later as he waved.

Some time later, Banri awoke fully and, "just what I would expect of girls", was the thought that greeted him. Kouko and Chinami had washed up, collected the trash into trash bags, and with that, had returned some order to the room.

It was about nine when Yanagisawa and 2D-kun were awakened, he supposed. Yanagisawa totally missed the timing for taking out his trash, and in the end, the three guys skipped school, hung out and spent the rest of the day in lethargy.

A message from Kouko came in the evening, and Banri got to know that she had caught a cold. And because Kouko said that she wasn't feeling well, they couldn't meet up and spend the weekend together, something which had been routine for them since they started dating. She didn't call back even after missing his calls, nor message back, but, thinking that it wouldn't be nice to keep disturbing her rest, he left a voice mail and left her alone thereafter.

Banri felt deeply responsible. Since he was the organizer of the drinking party, it was his room that they had hung out in, which might have gotten a little chilly in the middle of the night when the wind got in.

And thus, the week passed and it was Monday.

The long awaited practice day of the Festival-Research club.

Banri sent a mail asking, "Will you be coming today?", but there was no reply, and he concluded that Kouko was still staying in bed that day.

Thus, during noon, he was surprised to see Kouko at the usual gathering place, the rehearsal room of a district facility.

"Huh? I thought you were resting at home."

On hearing Banri's voice, who had just finished changing in the Gents, Kouko turned around sharply. She was in a white T-shirt and commonplace jersey pants. Pretty much the same outfit as the other upperclassmen girls.

"Are you feeling ok? You caught a pretty bad cold, didn't you?"

"....."

She quietly nodded.

She had a scrunchy held in her mouth. She then busied herself with flinging her long hair back with both her hands, twisted her hair, then wrapped it into a nicely coiled bundle.

Considering that we haven't seen each other in a while, she's surprisingly cold, huh?, thought Banri as he peered into the white face of Kouko.

"Why?", asked Kouko after bundling up her hair beautifully, like magic, with a single scrunchy. That smiling face. The perfect Kaga Kouko smile.

Even though she didn't seem really different, it felt like she was being unusually distant.

Just as he wanted to take a closer look at her,

"Wow, Kaga-chan, what a skilfully done hair-bun!"

"How did you do it? Can I also do it with my hair length?"

The upperclassmen came with their hair brushes and hairbands, and Banri couldn't say a thing in the end. With low spirits, he could only extract himself from the female formation.

Linda was yet to be seen.

"Tada Banri~i, you didn't show up much recently, did you?"

One of the upperclassmen guys suddenly rubbed Banri's buttocks from behind. *Hiyh*, Banri jumped, and to avoid exposing his back, he turned around to evade by making a wide circular step, like that of a sumo wrestler. However,

"Hey, I'm really sorry! A lot happened and..... more importantly, can you stop that!"

"Oh oh, he's resisting!"

"I heard you have been getting conceited lately!"

Another upperclassman came up, slapped him on the butt, and tickled his sides, resulting in Banri going "Eeyhiyhiy" and running about trying to escape. The number of bullying upperclassmen increased to three, then four, with the only freshman guy naturally amounting to their toy.

"If it's about the incident of the drinking party the other day, didn't I already apologize!?"

With regards to the incident of Banri leaving the club drinking party, which even the 4th-years

attended, ahead of the rest, he had already received a pardon on the grounds that he wasn't feeling too well, but,

"It's not about that!"

"It seems like you are really dating our little golden robo-tan, aren't you!?"

"We saw you holding hands the other day, jeez!

"Damn you, didn't you say that you were just friends!?"

The intense tickling caused Banri to lie fallen on the floor, unable to even catch his breath. Even when Banri tried yelling, *Why are you guys still acting like kids at your age!?*, the assaulting hands did not subside. With everyone leaning on him and slapping him with towels, he got the feeling that if this were to go on, even his jersey would soon get taken off. *Gyaa gyaa*. While screaming, without thinking, Banri turned his eyes to Kouko for help.

Kouko was standing erect.

With her feet planted somewhere in the center of the rehearsal room, her face looked as if her soul had been plucked out from her.

It was not because she was talking to any other upperclassmen, nor was she looking at the clamoring Banri; her big eyes were merely open and vacant, not paying any heed to her surroundings. For some reason, she ended up quickly undoing the hairdo which she had taken the trouble to fix earlier. She shook her head two, three times, brushing her hair back, and looked at the doorway with vacant eyes. Both that absentminded look on her face, and her overly pale, white face seemed out of the ordinary.

While still being pinned down by his upperclassmen, Banri could not take his eyes off Kouko. *Does she still have fever? Is she feeling ok?*

Wanting to talk to her, he desperately tried to pick himself up and at that moment,

"All right, time to gather! What on earth are you guys doing!"

The door opened and a third-year upperclassman appeared. Linda also came in along with the upperclassman,

"Hey!? Who are the ones bullying Banri!"

Driving away those who had been pinning down Banri, Linda grabbed his hand and pulled him up. Exerting strength, then letting go of that hand, *bishi!*, with both of them almost synchronized. They smiled at each other, face-to-face, a proof of their friendship. The sign of the secret relationship they shared and kept from the rest. ..... while there was no real need for them to keep it a secret, neither was there any real need to explain everything right from the

beginning, was what Banri thought.

Finally saved, Banri searched for Kouko with his eyes, but the crowd of gathering club members prevented him from doing so.

The third-years carried a number of heavy-looking carton boxes and put them on the floor.

"These are for the guys! Those are for the girls! Open them up and take one each!"

The third-year instructed the club members to open the boxes.

Upon opening the boxes, inside them were used, worn-out geta-clogs and kasa-hats for the girls. All of them had the names of other universities written with markers, and while Kosshi-senpai handed them out one by one, he said,

"All these are on loan to us, so please make sure not to lose them! And take care of them properly!"

Got it! The excitement could not be contained within the low-toned replies.

That's right. Coming next month, it would finally be the debut of the Festival Research club's Awa-dance.

Even when it was termed as a debut, it was more like just a matter of getting to blend in with the Awa-dance group from other universities, a so called Ren-group, to participate as dancers in a dance procession which relies on large numbers, but still, a debut was a debut. Everyone would be dancing in the procession along the commercial district in midday.

"We have neither musical instruments nor lanterns. Well, you will get used to it."

Here, Banri was also handed a pair of geta-clogs, which had a rich wood color, and deep blue straps. While it was somewhat a pity for the geta-clogs to be marred with a marker-written 'M' that seemed to indicate their size, they were lighter than they appeared, and even though they looked worn, they had a beautiful shine to them and weren't dirty in the slightest.

Sliding his feet into the prepared socks, and stuffing his Yes-No fan into his jersey pants, Banri tried wearing the geta-clogs.

They were surprisingly high and his feet were unsteady. He tried leaning and putting his weight forward,

"..... uwah....."

Gah-kuh, he almost fell forward.

Are we really going to dance in these? With his elevated view, he looked around uncertainly.

"We'll look really uncool if we fall." "My toes are already hurting." The upperclassmen were also expressing their insecurities.

Is Kouko ok, as he turned to look, the girls were having trouble just wearing their kasa-hats. Tying the red cords around their chin and wearing the hats at an angle to cover their faces, they started murmuring among themselves, "Is it ok to be like this? Unable to see what's in front?", "Aren't these larger than those we borrowed last time?"

Which reminds me, weren't the upperclassmen attired in Awa-dance outfits during the orientation day? In his mind, Banri recalled that intense, bustling memory of spring. A day of scattering cherry blossoms, and raining confetti. The clamors from the American football club, the violent conduct of the pro-Wrestling club, the thighs of the cheerleaders, the sambas from the orchestra, and also --- those bright lips of Linda.

I wonder what Linda thought when she chanced upon me that day? The sudden desire to ask Linda about it came to Banri's mind.

The girls in the rehearsal room had put on the collected kasa-hats and were all dressed in similar T-shirts. With merely many lips parted into smiles lined up, from just a glance alone, he could no longer distinguish one from the other.

"Let's form a line and start practice to try getting used to these."

On the upperclassman's order, everyone lined up to form up a circle. Then, each and every one of them wobbling on their feet, *"one, two, go!"*, at that signal, with faltering steps, the circle started 'gliding' outward to the outer perimeter of the rehearsal room.

With a *"yoh"*, Banri too raised up both his hands, and stepped out in big strides the way he was taught.

"..... oooh..... whoops!?"

His momentum caused him to pitch forward and he was just a step short from falling. "Hey, watch it!", his upperclassmen immediately laughed from behind, to which he somehow managed to retort, "I'm fine!".

In order not to stop the 'glide', he took another step forward. To prevent himself from falling disgracefully, finally, he lowered his hip and in an unsteady pose, it was difficult for him to even pay conscious attention to his movements. On top of that, the geta-clog straps bit painfully into the gaps in between his toes.

Even so, perhaps due to the difference in experience, the upperclassmen were getting down to form, and were walking while dancing with a comfortable pace. With a rather desperate look, Banri kept up with them. 'Gliding' with them, as the rhythm flowed.

At that moment, he noticed that Kouko wasn't around. Her signature rigid movements were

nowhere to be seen.

"Huh? Kaga-san? Where is she?"

As he looked around,

"Eh? I'm here."

Just right before him, a girl, with a kasa-hat donned, whose face he was unable to tell turned around and waved to him with one hand. On another look at the face beneath that slightly raised kasa-hat, it indeed belonged to Kouko,

"That aside..... aren't you already amazingly used to this!?"

Surprised, Banri raised his voice without thinking. The other upperclassmen also realized that truth and their feet stopped as they turned around.

Everyone had rigid movements due to the geta-clogs they weren't accustomed to, had their faces hidden with the kasa-hats, were wearing similar-looking T-shirts and similar pants. Within this circle where each individual's hairstyle was not even distinguishable, Kouko had been dancing 'normally'. Without getting called the golden robot, erh, C-3PO, in ridicule, she had completely erased her presence within this faceless dancer crowd.

An *Orhh!* came from somewhere, accompanied by applause, to which Kouko's face turned red beneath her kasa-hat.

"Looks like we are doing pretty well, aren't we?"

"All right, let's up the pace a little."

Kakakan, the musical instruments for practice were added in and the practice continued. The steps made by the geta-clogs came together, and as a result of the synchronized dance, the members continued advancing, drawing the circle as they swayed in a line. Even though the air-conditioner should have been switched on, today was a sultry day, and in an instant, Banri's neck was covered in perspiration.

But even so, he continued moving forward, in sync with his upperclassmen, right, left, right, left. He took strides as big as he could, fluttering his hands, gradually advancing his feet that were clad in unfamiliar clogs. *Tada, your hip, your hip*, he was told, and he consciously lowered his bobbing hip, taking care not to fall. But he had to take bigger strides, lighter one. Be more masculine, be more dynamic.

When a certain gap opened up between the members, before long, the line came to a halt.

As a result of advancing a line at a time, one corner of the sweat-drenched dancers had became a whirlpool. Everyone's faces were flushed from the heat, breathing a little heavily, slowing

down their steps and passing by each other in alternating fashion.

"Fun, isn't it?"

Someone's cracked voice said into Banri's ear.

"Yeah, it's fun."

Answering, he felt the presence of the girl who was the owner of the kasa-hat right beside him. He hadn't looked at her face, but, *is it Kouko?*, thought Banri.

Their breathing had become heavy, and both their body temperatures were hot from being close together.

Their pinkies touched each other by accident. A current might have run through them, he thought. Banri's eyes closed for an instant from the heat. His heart seemed to stop for a few seconds.

He twirled his pinky around hers, on the peril that his heart might just stop permanently.

His seemingly tightened heart pumped at an abnormal speed against his chest.

The temperature of his released finger, which seemed to be scalding hot, paralyzed Banri's body. Breathing hard, he panted several times like a beast.

Once again, he stepped out, with both his arms raised. The rhythm of the instruments beat against his skin.

That bittersweet --- fever of『Love』blinded the eyes of this dancing body.

* * *

The practice, which lasted a bit more than two hours, ended,

"Kaga-san, what are you doing later? Lectures?"

Patter, a drop of water hit his nose.

Uwah, exclaimed Banri, who then looked up at the sky. More large droplets came falling, hitting his face.

While the sky had been covered with many clouds since morning and it appeared as if it could

rain anytime, according to the weather forecast report, it should only have started raining at night. Thus, he hadn't brought an umbrella.

The sky darkened all of a sudden, and the air was enveloped with the dusty smell of rain. Black patches started increasing in number on the road, and the people walking on the street started breaking into a run. About half the people were preparing to gradually open either their foldable, or vinyl umbrellas.

Before long, the sound of rain became deafening to his ears.

Banri, who had been rooted in place, taken aback by the sudden intensifying rain, could also take it no longer,

"Crap, let's go to a place with shelter!"

Just as he wanted to run off with Kouko,

"....."

Kouko looked at Banri's face absentmindedly, without moving her legs.

The rain droplets fell onto her face and cheeks.

"What are you doing? Come on!"

He took her stuff with his left hand, and grabbed her hand with his right. When he pulled Kouko, she too started running, and for now, the two of them escaped to the edge of the eaves of a stationary shop which had its shutters closed.

And at around the same time, *Zahh*, a loud sound was heard, and the rain suddenly became heavy. It was a pelting downpour.

With the droplets forming a smoke-like white at the feet, salarymen either used their briefcase or newspapers to cover their heads, dashing; the middle school girls from a nearby private school were screaming, "Kyaaaaa!", and for some reason broke into roars of laughter, then the mass of them ran off along the road that led to the station.

Banri wiped his face, and looked down helplessly in disgust at his soaked jeans.

"What a heavy downpour.....! Shall we buy an umbrella?"

Kouko was of course drenched as well. The sleeves of her chiffon blouse could be seen through, revealing the skin that they stuck to, and her calfskin bag, which looked branded, wasn't spared from the spots of miserable splotches. *Oh my*, Banri brushed his cold, wet hair back.

"I'm sure they sell umbrellas around here. I will run to a convenience store and buy one for you

too, Kaga-san. It will be terrible if your cold gets worse."

And then, he noticed.

From the side view of Kouko's, who had been remaining quiet, this was the first time he had seen her looking so stiff. Without wiping the droplets off her wet cheeks, and with wet hair continuing to stick to the front of her nose, she stood beside Banri, holding her breath.

"..... Kaga-san? What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?"

He peered into Kouko's face anxiously, but she didn't so much as to shift her eyes. *Hellooo*, Banri waved his hands, and finally, she looked at him, but without any smile on her face.

Her vacant look merely wavered.

The air that was humidified by the rain was filled with the thick fragrance of roses. Kouko, who was right there, was so quiet that her very existence seemed uncertain, and it wouldn't be a surprise if she were to just quietly disappear like that. The sound of the rain washed away everything, giving off the feeling that everything was 「voided」.

What was certain was that she wasn't normal. Somewhere, with Banri being none the wiser, Kouko had a change of heart.

"Kaga-san, what's wrong? Did something happen?"

"....."

With soulless eyes and an expressionless face, Kouko blinked several times. Without a break, the raindrops ran off the tip of her long eyelashes. Droplets and droplets, streaming endlessly. And then,

"..... do you, like me?"

She asked. Abruptly.

Eh?, returned Banri without thinking.

"Wh-What are you saying? ..... why? Of course I like you."

Even with his answer, Kouko's expression did not change. Without even brushing her rain-soaked hair back, Kouko just breathed quietly. Her slender shoulders that could be seen through the see-through clothes that had stuck to them, were shaking.

Then, she grabbed Banri's hands. Her wet fingers, cold and weak, had hardly any strength put into them.

"..... really?"

She tilted her head slightly, and droplets rolled off the tip of her chin.

"Do you really like me?"

Her wavering gaze urged.

Without saying a word, however, something inside of Banri...

Felt wrong, and his heart jumped. He did not know what in the world had caused Kouko to act like this. But, something had happened.

"Why are you asking this now? Didn't I tell you that I like you? ..... Or is it that what Oka-chan said the other day is bothering you? That I'm jealous of Yana-ssan, are you really worried about that? If that's the case, there's no need."

Shaking her head sideways, Kouko probably didn't hear what Banri said. With eyes conveying that it didn't matter what he said, she continued to ask.

"Do you, like me.....? When will you stop liking me? What will make you hate me? When will you stop needing me? ..... am I being irritating by saying these things?"

--- yes.

If he answered with that, Koukou would probably cry.

But, he did increasingly want to say that to her. Her incomprehensible incessant urging was making him feel like he was being made the bad guy here. *What will make you hate me? When will you stop needing me? Am I being irritating?* He had never once said any of that, for crying out loud. Where did Kouko's sense of being the victim come from? Why she did start acting in such a manner all of a sudden?

Since he didn't know, *What's wrong?*, he asked but still, he couldn't make any progress with Kouko never answering his query, while she kept on questioning in a one-sided manner.

Even when he clearly said, *I like you*, those words did not seem to reach Kouko.

He felt futility, anger, and hurt towards that --- perhaps he actually thought that a guy wouldn't feel such emotions?

"I mean, seriously..... what's up with you?"

"..... do you, still..... like me?"

Is she going to carry on?

"..... like I've been telling you! I don't get you! Seriously, what's wrong with you all of a sudden! Did I do anything to you, Kaga-san!?"

He returned in a voice which, no softer than the drumming rain, perhaps felt a little strong. Kouko quivered.

"..... but....."

She frantically met the eyes of Banri. Then,

"I've been feeling uneasy. ..... and scared. I kept thinking about unpleasant things. ..... I don't want to be like this, either. I want to always remain adorable in front of you, Tada-kun. But, no matter how I tried.....! No matter what I do, I just keep feeling uneasy....."

Her beautiful face contorted. Her breath became short and it was followed by sounds of crying.

"..... eeh.....?"

What on earth is it about me that makes her feel uneasy, I wonder? --- Banri searched hard within himself, on the words he had said and how he had acted. Despite that, he couldn't figure it out. He only knew that Kouko was crying before his eyes. Her face from her throat to her forehead was flushed, and with one hand covering her eyes, she sobbed.

Banri just couldn't bear hearing that sound.

"..... sorry. I'm sorry, ok? Kaga-san. Sorry, sorry..... sorry. Really."

I became frantic and peered into her face. If anything, Banri was weak against Kouko's crying voice. Anger, pride, weariness, all those things were peeled off too quickly, leaving Banri as if he was stark-naked. He couldn't bear that. Really.

Compared to any kind of harsh words, to getting beaten up and getting kicked, or to getting hacked, a teardrop of Kouko's was much more painful to Banri's heart.

Perfect happiness suited Kouko more. That was what Banri believed deep down.

Thus, he wanted to give her just that.

He wanted to envelop her in perfect happiness. He didn't want to show her anything other than that. Things such as sadness, pain, bitterness, uneasiness, worry; he wanted to eliminate all those things from her world. Pure and perfect, dazzling and beautiful. A frail treasure. Because that was Kaga Kouko.

He only wanted to order all the things from this world that suited Kouko.

"It's all my fault. Sorry."

If it was for Kouko, he was willing to cover himself with any kind of mud.

If it was for protecting her, then, he was willing to take on any kind of dirty things, cold, sad or unpleasant things.

Like a shield, Banri embraced Kouko's body which had grown cold, and looked up at the raining sky. A low swirl of layers and layers of dull silver, thick clouds could be seen. This rain would probably continue. Perhaps, as a result of the shower impeding the passage of many people by foot, before he realized, the flux of people had ceased.

"There's nothing to feel uneasy about. Since there's nothing you need to worry about. Everything's fine. Perfect."

With her face pressed against Banri's chest, Kouko was still crying.

Rubbing her shoulders which were heaving like a child, Banri stroked her wet hair, and tried whispering to her.

"..... need any pretty boys?"

Kouko's back quivered. A little chuckle seemed to have escaped her. The sound of laughter mixed in with her sobs. *I don't need that.....*, came her faint voice which seemed to be colored

with anger.

Deep down, Banri felt relieved.

Because he absolutely didn't want to be hated by her. Which was merely a matter of a growing reality. The time they spent together was more fun and dear to him than anything, and he definitely didn't want to let go of that. He wanted to be with Kaga Kouko forever, for eternity.

He wanted to be messed around, to be troubled, by that turbulent and incomprehensible nature of hers.

Banri once again applied his strength to embrace Kouko's body. He really wanted her to stop crying. To stop hating him. To be with him. To feel secure with him. To stop fearing. To believe in him. To be happy. He had never even thought that the「Him」whom Kouko doubted existed within himself.

From the bottom of his heart, it didn't matter what happened to him.

It didn't matter at all. Really.

Everything was for the sake of Kaga Kouko's happiness. That alone was enough. He wanted nothing else. Would she dislike a man who doesn't have his own mind, he wondered.

Screened by the sound of rain, hidden by the edge of the eaves, Banri gradually crouched down, and in a scooping manner, he carefully kissed Kouko. Kouko's body just stiffened, and she said nothing.

They touched with their warm body temperatures.

As if all boundaries had disappeared, before long, the two of them melted. Intense spasms ran through their spines to their necks. A tremendous sensitivity soaked into the cells of their entire bodies. Their entire nervous systems were short-circuited.

Their minds might have even been connected. The sound of the crackling, numbing sparks might have resounded even in Kouko's ears.

Nothing else existed. This might be all there was to life. If he removed his pressed lips, and opened his worthless eyes, what kind of end would the world come to, Banri wondered.

＊ ＊ ＊

--- I slowly opened my eyes.

Banri's room was pitch-dark, and from outside the window, the city was still enveloped by the deep darkness of the night.

I wondered why I awoke at this kind of hour. In the first place, it was strange for a dead person like me to be sleeping.

When I sat up, I felt an even stronger sense of discomfort.

Banri, who was always just by my side, was not here. That Tada Banri, who was well and alive, whom I had been watching over all this while, was not here. Nowhere to be seen. *Where on earth is he?* As I tried to stand,

"..... ugh.....!"

A terrible headache made me feel dizzy.

My knees, devoid of strength, gave way, and I crouched down onto my mattress.

The touch of the sheets. The towel blanket against my cheek. The bed that creaked under my weight. The residue of my own smell in the pillow. Something was wrong. Something, was definitely wrong.

I propped myself up, attempted to get off the bed for now, and ended up falling onto the ground. A heavy 'thud' resounded. As if weights had been attached to my body, my arms and legs couldn't move too well. It was even difficult to support my heavy head with my neck, and my forehead hit the floor several times.

I stretched my quavering hand out, holding it against the black of night.

Impossible.

How could it be?

Why?

Looking at the full-length mirror set against the wall, it was reflecting the figure of Tada Banri --- me --- sprawled across the floor. With thick standing hair, and eyes wide open, I stared back at the me who was inside the mirror.

It was my own face.

Mine.

"..... uwu, ... ah....."

The one who was alive was me.

I got back my life, my body. The instant I realized this, I recklessly applied my strength and got up. I put my hands against the wall and leaned my weight forward. While wobbling, I took a step.

There was a place I ought to go. I had to go there. Quickly, without any hesitation,

"Linda.....!"

I simply called out the name of a person.

I had always, always and always, always,

"..... Linda.....!"

I had always wanted to rush to your side. I wanted to come back. I wanted to fulfill my promise.

I moved my legs feverishly, deliriously called out Linda's name, and after taking a few steps across the room, just as I was about to dash past the doorway. At that moment, my feet stepped on something. As my body sailed through mid-air from the momentum of my dash, 『my feet got swept off』; that was the one strange precise phrase that I had in my mind,

--- he slowly opened his eyes. Once again.

The hot taste of iron of his blood spread across the inside of his mouth, and upon tentatively searching with his tongue, it seemed like the inside of his lip had been cut deeply by the front of his teeth for some reason.

The uncomfortable open wound throbbed, and his upper lip was covered with an unpleasant warmth. As he wiped with the back of his hand, there was a slimy, unpleasant feel. The blood might even have drooped all the way to the chin.

He had hit his face on the floor. *Thank goodness that I didn't break any teeth*, maybe that kind of carefree thought proved that he was still half-asleep, perhaps.

The slippers that he had bought for Kouko were overturned on the floor. *My ugly fall was probably a consequence of stepping on those*, he thought.

The beat of his heart seemed to be screaming in anguish. It pulsed intensely to the point of pain, and Banri involuntarily pressed both his hands against his chest, unable to bear that agony.

I want to come back.

Linda.

With the silhouette of that memory distinctly etched into his mind.

Linda, Linda, Linda --- he could remember those cries as well.

And right now, he was sitting on the floor.

That was the past, no, the true him, thought Banri. He might have to pay the doctor a visit. When morning comes, he should pick up the phone, call his parents and tell them what happened, then go back to Shizuoka, and go get a check-up at the hospital he frequented, and then..... where should he go from there?

What would happen if he got cured?

What would happen to him if that happens? He wondered. What would happen to this body?

Covering his mouth, Banri crawled back to the middle of the room. The middle of the DIY bookcase that he was using as a bookshelf.

He wanted to see his face. The smiling face of that guy beside Linda. He could no longer tell which was the real him. That was why he wanted to verify whether he was a different person with these eyes of his, thought Banri. But, he realized.

"..... huh.....?"

The photo that was supposed to be here was nowhere to be found. It disappeared without him knowing. Vanished. As if it had never been there in the first place.

"..... why.....? How come.....?"

Unable to bear with how the situation was progressing, he sat down onto the cold floor, with his slimy blood drooping from his mouth. Banri closed his eyes for now.

The next time he opened his eyes, no one would know whether that very same self of his would still be around.

~ End ~

Postscript

At last, mid-summer...! Isn't it...! At the moment it's ninety degrees in our house... yes! It's hot! With the window wide open, the electric fan running, somehow or other, we will handle it.

Even as it is, just facing my computer, my T-shirt is completely soaked with sweat. When I was younger, the sweat streaming from my skin was different in quality, somehow it was strangely thick and dense. Drip... drip... From my face, red chili sauce. From the middle of my back, lard. But now, in my thirties, it's become more runny. Every pore on my body opening fully, secreting oil like crazy, Mom? "Why does it suddenly feel like my mother's here?", I thought and looking behind me, from my discarded, sweat-soaked clothing, an overwhelming aura of grown woman, nearly to the point of standing up on it's own, swaying ominously... What should I do already? By the time this summer ends, there probably won't be anything left of me after I've dried out.

Every year walking outside, the air conditioning in the stores and vehicles was always on too strong, making it a necessity to put something on even on hot days. But this year, they're in power-saving mode all over, cutting back on that kind of air conditioning. Since then, what is this, taking a walk under the blazing sun, staggering, arriving after a struggle at the goal, the book store, and even entering, whaa...! With that 'whaa!', I can't even breathe, standing there stiff.

Beginning to faint, in a corner of my fading awareness, I thought, "Kappa really like to eat cucumber." It's so hot... A plate... it's evaporating... Fresh cucumber, cooled by river water, I really want to eat some... Soaked in miso sauce, it could even replenish my salt content... Having no connection with this whatsoever, that I was even thinking about the favorite dish of a strangely fishy amphibian (what?) seemed amazing to me at the time. All of you, please be careful. If you see Kappa, you're already in danger. Heatstroke is dangerous. Don't make eye contact with any passing amphibians!

Well then, with this and that, even "Golden Time", if you've noticed, has made it up to three volumes. All of you that have taken them in hand, we truly thank you! Have you been having fun and enjoying it? Once more, our college students haven't been studying... "Is that all right with you!?", I was writing steadily while wanting to slap them silly. If I were to look back at myself, I have a feeling they could have been a little more diligent. I mean, then I was about 10 kilos lighter, even dripping sweat. Not even a mosquito's bitten me. Nothing at all lately. The bugs don't come and visit. Why might that be? Have I become too ripe? This body...

I am thinking we will deliver the next volume around the start of the new year. By all means, please stick with us. To master Komatsu Eeji, and the guidance of Yuasa-sama, I am indebted to their staying with me.

And finally, to everybody who suffered from the Sendai Earthquake, we send our heartfelt condolences.

Takemiya Yuyuko

Translator's Notes

Scarlet Letter

↕ This is a translation of the expression, 姦通の手紙 , meaning literally "letter of unchastity". Since the usage of this expression approximates in many ways the old "Scarlet Letter", I used that as the translation, though in fact there is no indication in the text that the letter would be red. In fact, it would be tattooed or branded on her forehead. Whether this was once done literally, I cannot say.

See The Scarlet Letter for more background on this old puritan custom.

French?

↕ It turns out that Kouko is taking French class (see here). Here, though, she is trying to use English in the same way a rich English-speaking girl might use French, so I am using French to give the same impression here.

The original text in Japanese had, literally, in English, "My Boyfriend..."

Later, in chapter 3, Kouko tells Mitsuo, in English, "Go Home", which I have done again in French: *Rentre chez toi*.

In the anime as shown on CrunchyRoll, the voice part was of course left in the original Japanese, and Kouko is saying these things in English . . . and the subtitles were done in English as well. But in that case, the shock effect of Kouko's voice suddenly coming out in Japanese-accented English was fully there to anybody half listening, as opposed to simply reading the subtitles.

Conan Pun

↕ There is some word play going on here. コナン (Conan) and 困難 (konnan =difficult/hard) sound almost the same.

Reshiki

↕ This song is by the artist Reshiki, and the title is taken from a political buzz-phrase created by Hideo Higashikokubaru during his campaign to become the mayor of Miyazaki in 2007. Reference the Japan Times article here. The music video can be found here. It's a catchy tune, though I personally fail to see the connection between the song and the slogan. Banri must have been hearing the later part.

Face-Mein

↕ This is a pun. The normal word for the surface of one's face is 顔面 (gan-men = face-surface). Here, however, Chinami has substituted the word for noodles, 麺 , which has the same reading 'men' as the kanji for 'surface'. Hence Mitsuo's confused look in the second panel of the manga adaptation, chapter 26, page 19. I have used "mein" for noodles because these noodles are explicitly Chinese noodles. Think "chow mein."

Masquerade

↕ Another pun. The subtitle of this volume, 仮面舞踏会 (kamenbutoukai) means 'masquerade.' The word used here, 顔麺舞踏会 , is pronounced the same, but the first three beats (カメン = ka-me-n) now mean 'face-noodles' rather than 'mask' or 'disguise.'

Kouko's hair bun

↕ Here's a visual aid to supplement my crappy description.

Kasa-hats

↕Old-fashioned, eastern, conical hats made of straw and bamboo for to protect the head/face against rain, snow and sun. See this.

Ren-groups

↕A Ren-group or just Ren(連) to be precise, is just an Awa-dance term meaning group/clique with each group/clique either having a famous identity in Awa-dance culture, or comprising of specific demographics. For example, in the later case, a Corporate-Ren could be a group made up of office and corporate people, while a University-Ren would be made up of university students, which is the Ren that the Omaken (the Festival Research club) will be joining. During the dance festival itself, the different Rens will form up in a procession.